

India: Police arrest hundreds of striking Motherson autoworkers at protest

By Moses Rajkumar and Sasi Kumar
28 September 2019

Over two hundred striking workers of Motherson Automotive Technologies & Engineering (MATE), located at Sriperumbudur, an industrial hub 40 kilometers from Chennai, the capital of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, were arrested by the police on September 24, when they staged a protest rally in front of the Deputy Labour Commissioner (DLC) office in Irunkatukotai.

About 500 permanent Motherson autoworkers have been on strike for more than a month now. They are demanding the recognition of their newly formed trade union—Chengai Anna Mavatta Jana Nayaga Thozhilalar Sangam—as well as a wage rise and an end to harsh working conditions.

Arrested MATE workers were brought by a bus to a wedding hall in Sriperumbudur, detained there from the morning and released later the same evening. While walking to the detention hall after getting off the bus, arrested workers shouted slogans condemning Motherson management and against the police for using abusive language against union leaders. The workers demanded a wage rise and expressed their defiance of company's repression as well as the desire to carry forward their struggle to victory.

The police action was a move by the All India Anna Dravida Muneththra Kazhagam (AIADMK)-led state government to break the one-month-long strike conducted by Motherson workers in defiance of the company's harsh repressive measures. Since the strike began, MATE has dismissed 22 trainees and 33 professionals and suspended 15 permanent employees. Further, it has sent out a "Charge sheet cum Show cause Notice" to 200 striking workers.

The strike by Motherson workers is in danger in the face of repression by the company and the government. This must be met by workers expanding the struggle, mobilising the support of their class brothers and sisters in other auto plants and also other sectors in Sriperumbudur and elsewhere in India and internationally. However, the All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU), to which the new union is affiliated, has refused to mobilise the contract and trainee workers in the plant whom the company

is using to maintain the production during the strike. Neither has it mobilized workers at other MATE factories in support of the striking workers. Instead it has pathetically requested the company not to use them to break the strike.

The orientation of AICCTU leaders is not towards the working class, but towards labor department officials of the AIADMK government, which has a notorious anti-working-class record and has sent police to attack striking MATE workers. On September 24, the AICCTU directed striking workers to make appeals for the DLC's intervention to resolve their demands.

Meanwhile, MATE has already rejected the DLC's "advice" not to victimise workers. After the failure of talks on September 24, the dispute is scheduled before the DLC on October 1. In June, the AIADMK government declared the auto component sector a "public utility service," thus effectively banning strikes in the sector. On August 1, Madras High Court delivered an interim order on the government's decision, temporarily holding up its implementation. However, the threat against strikes in the auto sector remains.

AICCTU policies in the MATE strike flow from the politics of the party with which it is affiliated, the Maoist Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist)—Liberation [CPI (ML)—Liberation]. The CPI (ML)—Liberation is in alliance with the main Stalinist parliamentary parties--the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI). The CPM and CPI have a long and treacherous role of politically subordinating the working class to the parties of the bourgeoisie--Congress, the traditional party of the Indian bourgeoisie and various reactionary regional parties.

The Stalinists have supported all non-BJP [the ruling Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party] governments, mostly led by Congress, since 1991, which have carried out socially incendiary neo-liberal economic policies. In line with their Stalinist masters, the CPI (ML)—Liberation supported Congress in the last general elections held in April-May 2019. The CPI (ML)—Liberation tried to justify

its support for Congress arguing that “each vote of the Opposition should be consolidated and the BJP should be given a sound defeat in the coming elections.”

MATE workers should learn from the heroic struggle of the Maruti Suzuki workers at the Manesar car assembly plant in the northern Indian state of Haryana. The workers waged a series of militant struggles, including strikes and plant occupations in 2011, demanding higher wages and better conditions and most importantly against the contract labor system. In response they have faced a vicious company-government joint vendetta since mid-2012.

Seizing on a company-provoked altercation at the factory in July 2012, which led to a fire at the plant and the death of the company’s human resources manager, a massive witch-hunt was unleashed against the Manesar workers. About 2,400 workers were sacked and another 150 workers were arrested by the police based on company-supplied lists. In a company-government joint frame-up operation, 13 workers were sentenced to life imprisonment on bogus murder charges in March 2017. Twelve of the 13 were members of the executive committee of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), the independent union formed by Manesar workers in defiance of the company-stooge union.

The experience of Maruti Suzuki workers demonstrated the unity of all sections of the capitalist state—governments, police, courts—in collaborating with the company against workers to break their struggle, which posed a challenge to the sweatshop exploitation on which the profits of Indian and global capital are based. It was under the Congress Party-led state government that the initial attack on the Maruti Suzuki workers was launched. Nevertheless, the CPI (ML) supported Congress in the last general election.

The *World Socialist Web Site* published two earlier articles on the Motherson workers strike, breaking the media blackout and exposing company’s repressive measures against the workers. It also exposed the treacherous role of AICCTU and CPI (ML)—Liberation, calling on workers to break from those treacherous parties and affiliated unions and form their own independent action committees to take the struggle into their own hands. The WSWS explained that the Motherson strike is a part of growing international upsurge of the class struggle, as demonstrated by the strike of US General Motors workers, and insisted on the need for a unified struggle of workers against the global auto corporations.

WSWS supporters in India are regularly intervening among striking Motherson workers, distributing copies of WSWS articles on the strike and discussing the political issues confronting their struggle. Under conditions of the growing support and enthusiasm of Motherson workers toward the WSWS, AICCTU leaders have become nervous.

Futile attempts have been made by a few union officers to stop workers from reading WSWS articles. When WSWS supporters distributed leaflets to MATE workers who were being released from detention at the wedding hall on September 24, workers were told by union officials not to take copies of the WSWS printouts as they consisted of “a lot of lies.”

Nevertheless, over two hundred WSWS printouts were distributed and were well received by MATE workers. Challenging attempts by union officials to intimidate them, WSWS reporters asked why striking workers were isolated and why the rest of the workforce was not mobilised in strike action to prevent MATE from continuing production. WSWS supporters shouted in reply to attempts to block workers from taking leaflets, “Stop trying to emulate the fascistic RSS/BJP.” WSWS supporters explained to groups of workers the criticisms of the AICCTU’s role in the strike. Meanwhile, union officials were challenged to respond to the WSWS criticisms in their own publications.

At the same time that the capitalist media has virtually blacked any reporting of the more than month-long strike by MATE workers, the Stalinist and Maoist web sites, including those of CPI (ML) – Liberation and AICCTU, have so far also suppressed news of the strike. The red-faced union officials, taken aback in the face of workers support for the WSWS, retreated, saying, “We can debate differences and you have the right to freedom of speech.”

A worker who has played an important role in organising the MATE workers to fight for their demands spoke favourably of the WSWS position after speaking to WSWS reporters: “Now I have understood your orientation. I like the way you speak about the role of the working class. I will ask our union why they have not published news about our strike on their own web site and in print media.”

The young worker said he is determined to fight to the end to win the demands of workers: “Our struggle is important; I see this as a struggle for the betterment of the future generation.”

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>