India: Vicious attack on Maruti Suzuki trainees highlights plight of migrant workers during COVID-19 lockdown

By Kranti Kumara
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A dozen or so young workers employed as trainees at the Maruti Suzuki’s Manesar car assembly plant in the north Indian state of Haryana were viciously attacked on April 8 by 25 to 30 goons who barged unannounced into their residences in the nearby Aliyar village.

Shouting that the workers were spreading the COVID-19 disease, the goons armed with rods, stones and hockey sticks barged into the five-storey building, which contains several one-room apartments where workers reside five to a room.

The Maruti Suzuki’s Manesar plant came to all-Indian and international prominence in 2011-12 when workers rebelled against a company and government-sponsored union and mounted a series of militant actions, including sit-down strikes, to challenge poverty wages and precarious contract jobs, and win recognition of the newly-founded Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU). Subsequently 13 workers, including the entire MSWU leadership, were sentenced to life in prison as result of a monstrous frame-up mounted by India’s largest automaker, its principal parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of Narendra Modi and the Congress Party, and the courts and police (see: Three years since Indian court ordered 13 framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers jailed for life).

The trainee Maruti Suzuki workers who were attacked in Aliyar this month all hail from the eastern state of Bihar, which is one of the country’s most populous and impoverished states. There are large numbers of migrant workers from Bihar in most major cities and industrial areas, including Delhi and the nearby Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, Kolkata and Mumbai.

According to reports that the World Socialist Web Site has received from the Provisional Committee of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), the thugs who attacked the trainees appear to have been acting at the behest of the corrupt village head, a position known in Hindi as Sarpanch.

Like tens if not hundreds of millions of domestic migrant workers, the trainees have been stranded, hundreds of kilometres from their home villages, and without any income or sustenance by Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s precipitous lockdown.

Without any prior warning or planning, Modi announced on the evening of March 24 that just hours later India would be subject to a three-week anti-coronavirus lockdown, which was later extended for a further 19 days through May 3. Overnight, hundreds of millions of day-labourers, trainees, and contract workers found themselves without employment and income (see: Modi places India’s 1.3 billion people under lockdown).

Bihari migrant workers, along with Muslim and Dalit workers, have long suffered from derision and discrimination, as India’s ruling elite systematically promotes all manner of backwardness and prejudice as a means of diverting mass social discontent and splitting the working class.

The BJP, the RSS and their Hindu supremacist allies have ratcheted up their communalist agitation and violent attacks on minorities, especially Muslims, in the past year as the economy has unravelled.

The attack on the Maruti Suzuki trainees was clearly aimed at fomenting division and confusion among India’s workers and toilers who are undergoing extraordinary hardship during the nationwide lockdown. Recklessly and callously, the Modi government made no provision to provide working people with the necessities of life during the lockdown, then announced a pittance in emergency relief that many, if not most, have been unable to access.
Soon after the April 8 attack, Khushiram, a longstanding member of the MSWU provisional committee, traveled to the trainee workers’ residence in Aliyar to show his solidarity and support. Khushiram subsequently sent the WSWS a link to a Hindi video interview conducted by an organization called Workers Unity in which a victimized worker and Khushiram explain and comment upon the goon assault.

Khushiram is seen denouncing this premeditated attack and expressing his suspicion that the village Sarpanch and Maruti Suzuki management had joined hands with the aim of breaking solidarity between the permanent, contract workers and trainees employed at the shuttered Manesar plant.

One of the trainees, Krishna Kumar, suffered a head injury so severe that he had to be taken to a hospital, and later to a better-equipped hospital in Gurgaon, a town 20 kilometres (12.5 miles) away.

A week after this video was posted on Facebook, Khushiram received an intimidating phone call from the superintendent of police at the Manesar police station. In a written statement to the WSWS, Khushiram described this call:

“Today I got a call from the Superintendent of Manesar police station. He says a Sarpanch around Manesar has filed a complaint against me. So, I have to go to Manesar police station. I have come to know that from Aliyar village (this) action is being initiated against me because of my opinion in the media against the murderous attack on Maruti labourers on April 8 by some bullies.”

Khushiram further observed that the BJP Haryana State government and the Modi government at the Centre are using the police to intimidate, harass and beat up workers during the lockdown.

“It is also known that the ruling party is using the police to do dirty politics even inside the lockdown,” said Khushiram.

The BJP and its Hindu right allies have attempted to deflect blame for the pandemic and its ruinous economic impact onto Muslims and migrant workers, accusing them of carrying and, in the case of the Muslims, deliberately spreading the coronavirus (see: India’s BJP and its Hindu-right allies scapegoat Muslims for spread of pandemic).

These vile lies clearly helped instigate the mob attack on the Maruti Suzuki trainees.

Modi’s precipitous lockdown has caused massive distress for all sections of working people, but especially

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