

Indian Magna Cosma workers continue strike against victimisation and for recognition of new union

Shibu Vavara, Sasi Kumar
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Workers at an auto parts factory in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu have been on an indefinite strike since September 17 demanding the reinstatement of 18 victimised workers and recognition of their union.

Fifty-five of the 75 permanent workers at the Magna Cosma plant in the Sriperumbudur and Oragadam industrial hub, located 55 km southwest of Chennai, the state capital, have joined the industrial action.

Magna Cosma International India Private Limited is a part of Magna International, a Canadian global automotive supplier with 316 manufacturing operations and 84 product development, engineering and sales centres in 29 countries. The conglomerate employs over 125,000 workers in its global network.

The Magna plant at Vaddakupattu, a village in Oragadam, started manufacturing in 2013. It supplies auto parts to major companies, including Nissan, Ford, Hyundai and Kia.

As is widely practised in both public and private sector companies in India, Magna maintains a multi-tier work force to facilitate super exploitation, with just 75 permanent workers alongside 350 contract workers and 200 trainees.

Striking workers told the WSWS they have faced deteriorating conditions for three and half years, enforced by an openly pro-company union affiliated to the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), the union federation of the big business Congress Party.

Early this year they formed a new union affiliated to the Maoist Left Trade Union Centre (LTUC). The management responded by unleashing a witch-hunt against the militant workers who took the initiative in forming the new union. On March 19, it suspended six workers. The management also ordered the arbitrary

transfer of another 12 workers to its plant in Pune, Maharashtra. After these workers refused to accept the forced transfers, they were also suspended.

The workers staged a protest and demanded the reversal of the company's victimisations. On August 26, the permanent workers began a protest hunger strike. On September 17 they launched their strike. Although the strike involves a relatively small number of workers, it demonstrates a determination to fight for better conditions.

However, contrary to the expectations of the strikers, the LTUC has pursued its usual pattern of betrayal. The LTUC's treacherous record includes its role in a 140-day strike in the same industrial hub by Motherson Automotive Technologies & Engineering (MATE) workers over higher wages, better conditions and union recognition from August last year to mid-January.

The LTUC isolated and betrayed the Motherson workers' nearly five-month strike. It directed the strikers back to work on January 13 not only without meeting any of their demands but also leaving sacked 51 militant workers. This strengthened the hand of the management, culminating in July in the permanent dismissal of the 51 workers.

As at Motherson, the LTUC is working to isolate the Magna strikers, refusing to call out the contract workers and trainees at the plant. Such a call would inevitably raise the burning issues that the contract workers face—the need for permanency and higher wages.

No effort has been made by the LTUC, like during the Motherson workers strike, to appeal to workers in other Magna plants across India and globally, or to other sections of workers in the huge industrial hub and elsewhere in India.

Instead, the LTUC told the Magna strikers to make futile appeals to the right-wing AIADMK state government and the state Labour department to intervene to resolve their demands, despite the AIADMK's open anti-working class record.

Some union officials from Sanmina and Ford appeared at the Magna strike and offered their verbal "solidarity" and some financial contributions. Ford Employees Union leader Selva visited the site on September 24, and declared support for the strike and gave some funds. He then told the strikers he would speak to the Ford company about their strike. He was not going to appeal to Ford workers, but to the management—underscoring the unions' pro-company orientation.

The LTUC directed the Magna striking workers to go to nearby Panchayats (village-level local councils), including Vaddakkupattu, Chenna kuppam, Mampakkam and Panruti, to win support among village people and Panchayat leaders. According to a LTUC Facebook report, "they denounced the evil actions of the Magna management and said Tamil Nadu government should take action." So, the campaign was again directed to appeals to the AIADMK government.

As well as the Motherson sellout, the Magna strikers must draw lessons from the bitter experience of workers at the Japanese-owned Maruti Suzuki car assembly plant at Manesar in the northern Indian state of Haryana.

In a monstrous company-government frame-up, 13 militant Maruti Suzuki workers are in jail serving life sentences for a murder they did not commit. This vendetta was unleashed in July 2012, in an attempt to suppress growing militancy at the plant, including strikes, protests and plant-floor sit-downs from mid-2011 against the company's slave labour conditions.

India's capitalist rulers were determined to persecute these young workers and make an example of them because they dared to challenge the brutal working conditions that prevail in the country's globally-connected auto industry.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the WSWS launched a global campaign to win the release of the Maruti Suzuki workers, exposing this conspiracy, which involves the entire political establishment, the courts and the police.

The attack on the Maruti Suzuki workers was initiated by Haryana's Congress state government and supported by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance that held power in New Delhi until May 2014. When these governments passed into the hands of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), the frame-up continued.

But no less determined to imprison the jailed Maruti Suzuki workers in a wall of silence are the Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India—and their respective trade union affiliates, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All India Trades Union Congress (AITUC).

The Stalinists are afraid that any fight to defend the jailed Maruti Suzuki workers would disrupt their political partnership with the Congress Party and their cosy relations with the employers. Exposure of the frame-up would also put the lie to their claim that the courts and other institutions of the Indian Republic constitute a "democratic" bulwark against the ruling class and the employers.

The struggle for permanent jobs, decent wages, improved working conditions and basic democratic rights can be advanced only by challenging the capitalist system and all its political agencies. This requires a complete break from all the Stalinist-Maoist controlled, pro-capitalist unions and the formation of genuinely independent rank-and-file committees.



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