

Management presses to impose “discipline” as strike by Indian Toyota workers enters fourth month

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As the bitter three-month-long strike by over 3,000 Toyota Kirloskar Motor (TKM) workers at two plants in the southern state of Karnataka enters the fourth month, company management, with support from the stridently pro-business Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) state government, is pushing ahead with what the company calls an “enquiry against workers.”

After a meeting TKM management held with the state Industries Minister Jagadish Shettar and Labour Minister Shivaram Hebbar on February 8, the company made it clear that it will not drop its investigation against the alleged “misconduct” of workers. Such a statement coming soon after the meeting with state government officials demonstrates that the BJP government is closely cooperating with Toyota to victimize the workers whose only sin has been to oppose the back breaking production speed-up management has been imposing upon the workers.

Hebbar had previously said that it is the company’s “prerogative” to hold inquiries about “worker misconduct.”

The TKM plant is located about 30 km from the Karnataka state capital Bengaluru (formerly Bangalore) and manufactures vans, SUVs and cars for the Indian market. Bidadi is also home to various other multinational companies including Bosch and Coca-Cola.

TKM workers mounted a sit-in protest November 9 in front of the factory after the company summarily suspended a leader of the TKM Employees Union (TKMEU), Umesh Gowda Alur. Umesh had gone to speak to the workers inside the plant about their various grievances, including the unbearable speedup regime of producing one vehicle about every 2.5 minutes as

against the current average of 3 minutes. A day later, the company locked out the workers claiming that the strike was “illegal” and since then lifted and reimposed new lockouts over the following months.

Subsequently, the company suspended over 70 workers for “serious misconduct.” Management now insists that workers will only be taken back if they accept in writing the new 20 percent increase in production speed designed to produce 360 vehicles a day, up from 300, and also promise to not engage in any union activities that would disrupt production.

While the BJP state government has openly displayed its hostility toward the workers by conspiring with the management, leaders of the opposition parties, including the Congress Party and the Janata Dal (Secular), are now trying to posture as friends of the workers despite their strident pro-business orientation when they ruled the state.

Siddaramaiah, the leader of the opposition Congress Party and the state chief minister from 2013 to 2018, visited the workers in Bidadi Sunday, January 31, to declare his “support” for the striking workers.

He postured as a friend of the workers by saying: “It is our state that has given land, water and electricity to Japan’s Toyota company to start their manufacturing facility. It is wrong to impose Japan’s labour laws on the employees in our state.” He added, “We don’t have any objection if a foreign company wants to invest and start its manufacturing facility. But it has to follow the laws of our land and treat its employees in a fair manner.”

It was during his tenure as chief minister in 2014 that Siddaramaiah unleashed the police, who mounted an unprovoked attack against the TKM workers engaged

in a hunger strike against the company's three-week lockout of over 4,000 workers. So violent was the police attack that two of the workers, already weak from hunger, were severely injured and hospitalised. Workers at that time told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the police attack was completely unprovoked.

The TKMEU vice president, Pradeep Kumar, subsequently tried to sow illusions in this ruthless anti-worker politician. He said, "Siddaramaiah has assured to take up the matter with the government. The management refuses to talk to us and continues to demand an undertaking which is illegal and hasn't been mandated by the labour department."

All of the successive Karnataka state governments over the past decades, whether led by the Congress party, Janata Dal (Secular) or the BJP, have amended labour laws that permit hiring contract workers, increased overtime and to lay off workers at will.

It was also under the Congress Party-led state government in the northern state of Haryana that 13 Maruti Suzuki auto workers were monstrously framed in consort with the management on fraudulent murder charges and were given life sentences.

Last December, workers at the Wistron corporation's iPhone manufacturing plant at Narasapura, about 55 km from Bengaluru, vandalized management offices and overturned the cars of senior executives after the Taiwan-based contract manufacturer refused to pay them back wages of three months or more. The state factory inspectors found rampant abuse of workers at this facility.

The only concern of every political party in Karnataka is the reputation of the state as a cheap labour haven for multinational corporations. This is in line with the BJP-Modi government's "Make in India" policy under which it has dismantled all labour laws that provided a modicum of protection to Indian workers. Big corporations are now allowed nationally to hire workers for a "fixed-term" and also as contract workers who are then made to work long hours at miserable wages.

Despite the bravery and militancy of the workers, the strike nevertheless is at a crossroads. The Joint Committee of Trade Unions (JCTU) aligned with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), the union federations affiliated to two main Stalinist

parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI) respectively, have refused to mobilise other workers in Bidadi, despite the immense support the TKM workers enjoy. The TKM workers strike could act as the spearhead of a counteroffensive against the anti-worker conspiracy of the Karnataka BJP government and the company.

The striking Toyota workers should have no illusions about the pro-worker posturing of the opposition parties promoted by the TKMEU. Both the ruling BJP and the opposition parties in the state want to bring the months-long agitation to an end under the company's terms. The only way forward is for the TKM workers to expand the strike by appealing to their class brothers and sisters in Bidadi itself, throughout India and internationally.

TKM strikers must establish their own independent organisations, rank-and-file action committees, to take control of the strike into their own hands. These committees should establish links with workers at all other industrial facilities in the region, issue appeals for solidarity strike action and call for a general strike to oppose the bullying threats against the strikers.



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