

Maruti Suzuki India workers jailed for life on frame-up murder charges speak to the WSWS

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The *World Socialist Web Site* is proud to publish the following online interview with two of the 13 Maruti Suzuki India Workers who in 2017 were jailed for life on frame-up murder charges.

The workers—only 11 of whom now survive—are the victims of a conspiracy involving the Japanese-based transnational automaker, Suzuki, the police, courts and the Haryana state and Indian Union governments.

The workers' sole "crime" is to have challenged the brutal sweatshop conditions that prevail in India's globally connected auto industry.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has exposed their frame-up in detail, including in a five-part series published in April-May 2017, as part of a campaign to mobilize the Indian and international working class to demand the immediate release and exoneration of the Maruti Suzuki workers.

Of the 13, 12 comprised the entire leadership of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU). An independent union, the MSWU was forged by workers at Maruti Suzuki's Manesar, Haryana car assembly plant in a bitter struggle against a company-backed, state-recognized union. In 2011-12, the Manesar workers repeatedly mounted militant job actions, including a sit-down strike.

Their defiance drew the ire not only of the management of India's largest automaker, but of employers across the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt, which is one of the country's two principal auto-making centres, and the Indian ruling elite as a whole, because they challenged the contract-labour system that has been used to divide workers and impose poverty wages and brutal working conditions.

On July 18, 2012, some four months after the workers had won legal recognition for the MSWU, the company staged a provocation. A foreman disciplined a worker after he objected to a caste-ist slur. When workers protested the suspension of Jiyalal, they were set upon by company goons. During the ensuing melee, a fire broke out which led to the death of a human resources manager.

This tragedy was then seized upon by the company and the Indian state to witch-hunt and frame up the workers. Using lists supplied by Maruti Suzuki, the police arrested hundreds of workers. Many were beaten while in custody. Ultimately, grave criminal charges were brought against more than 150 workers, and the company purged an additional 2,300 workers from its Manesar assembly plant workforce.

The trial of the Maruti Suzuki 13 was held in March 2017, after the workers had already endured almost five years' incarceration in the hellhole that is an Indian prison. It was a legal travesty from beginning to end. The judge arbitrarily excluded all testimony from workers, including those who were eye-witnesses to the July 18, 2012 events, on the grounds that they would be "biased" toward the MSWU. Evidence was manufactured and witnesses were coached by the prosecution. The burden of proof was shifted onto the workers, with the judge declaring that if the workers could not prove someone else had lit the factory fire, this was proof that they had done it.

This witch-hunt was overseen by the entire political establishment. It

began under Congress Party governments in Haryana and at the national level. It was continued seamlessly after they were replaced by the Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). At the trial's conclusion, special state prosecutor Anurag Hooda demanded the workers be given the death penalty on the grounds that a message needed to be sent to investors. "Prime Minister Narendra Modi is calling for 'Make in India,'" he exclaimed, "but such incidents are a stain on our image."

The Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India—and their affiliated trade unions, respectively, the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC)—refused to mount any campaign to mobilize the working class in defence of the Maruti Suzuki 13. They feared such action would disrupt their political alliance with the big business Congress Party and their cozy relations with the employers.

In 2021, two of the Maruti Suzuki 13 died. Jiyalal succumbed to cancer at the age of 35. The Indian state is directly responsible for his death, as prison authorities failed to provide him with timely treatment. Earlier that same year, 37-year-old Pawan Dahiya perished from electrocution while on temporary COVID-19 pandemic release.

During the past two and a half years, the remaining 11—Ram Meher, Sandeep Dhillon, Ram Bilas, Sarabjeet Singh, Pawan Kumar, Sohan Kumar, Ajmer Singh, Suresh Kumar, Amarjeet, Dhanraj Bambi, and Pradeep Gujjar—were able to obtain bail pending the appeal of their convictions. The state opposed their release. Their lawyers, however, were able to cite court precedents that provided for the temporary suspension of the sentences of those who have already endured lengthy pre- and post-trial incarceration and whose appeals are not expected to be heard "in the near future."

Although the provisional release of the 11 is to be welcomed, the campaign to expose their frame-up and demand their full exoneration must continue.

They remain, it must be emphasized, under grave threat. The Indian authorities have not ceded an inch in respect to their frame-up no matter how discredited and pock-full of holes it is. Indeed, the state of Haryana has launched its own appeal of the outcome of the first trial, so as to press for the surviving 11 Maruti Suzuki auto workers to be sentenced to death.

Two of the workers who were the leaders of the MSWU, Mahan and Bahadur, (names changed to protect them from further vindictive reprisals) spoke to the WSWS. Despite the immense hardship they are still enduring, they are proud of the militant struggle they initiated and led back in 2011, maintain a fighting spirit, and are eager to contribute to and learn from the struggles of their class brothers and sisters around the world.

We reproduce below their responses which were translated from Hindi to English.

WSWS: Why do you think you and the other MSWU leaders were framed for the murder of Awanish Kumar Dev, the Human Resources

Manager at Maruti Suzuki? Who do you think was responsible for the frame-up? What role do you think the state and national governments play in this?

Mahan: In the murder of the HR manager, the leaders of MSWU were framed up by the company so that they could break the union of the workers. The company was successful in this conspiracy. The Congress Party state government gave full support to the company in trapping the Maruti Suzuki workers. The government hired a big lawyer against the workers, who did not allow the workers to be released from jail by repeatedly opposing our release.

Bahadur: It's still not known how the murder of Awanish Dev occurred. It happened in a big hall but he was 100 percent burnt by the fire. There was nothing in that hall that could cause an inferno and burn a person 100 percent. How did this whole murder game of management and administration happen? Our union was very strong in Gurgaon. Because of this, the management played this whole game, the management is completely responsible for this. The government is a puppet in the hands of the capitalists, so what can we do with the government? What hope we can have in it?

WSWS: It is well known now that the arrested workers were tortured back in 2012 by the police. Would you please describe what happened?

Mahan: The workers were arrested and then tortured by the police. The workers were beaten with sticks and tortured in other ways as well, which cannot even be described.

Bahadur: While under police remand, we suffered a lot. It was much worse than that what they do to a professional criminal. They hanged us from the ceiling with both hands tied and we fell unconscious. Additionally, two policemen were pulling our legs from both sides tearing apart our legs. Then they laid a rod weighing 100 kg on the top of us and then the policemen sat on the top of us. It was a very, very painful experience, brother.

WSWS: What support did you and your families receive from the Maruti Suzuki workers and other unions during the long imprisonment?

Mahan: During the life imprisonment, other unions together gave full support, paid the expenses of the lawyers and helped the family members financially.

Bahadur: During the long imprisonment, we and our family got full support from the union. These people helped our family a lot financially. I thank these people from the bottom of my heart.

“Workers of all countries need to unite and maintain their unity against the bourgeoisie.”

WSWS: Are you aware that neither the CITU nor the AITUC waged a campaign for the release of the legally lynched Maruti Suzuki workers? Do you have any thoughts on this?

Mahan: They “helped as much as they could” or so they said. After taking us into confidence, they did nothing for us. Since we are on bail, I am constrained by the fact that I will be endangered if I make statements against these apparatuses.

Bahadur: I can't say about CITU, but many trade unions fully supported us and cooperated with us and our family. I thank the trade unions wholeheartedly. But in my view, the big trade union leaders work to safeguard their bread and that is it. If the leaders of the trade union work together then it can be beneficial for the workers. That is why I request the trade unions to fight for the rights of the workers and be on the side of the workers so that the workers can fight for their rights and can give a fitting reply to the management.

WSWS: Capitalism is the root cause of the suffering inflicted upon

Maruti Suzuki workers. We believe the workers should consciously wage a struggle for socialism by joining hands with their brothers and sisters worldwide. The WSWS and the ICFI have initiated a struggle to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to wage such a struggle. What are your thoughts on this?

Mahan: Workers around the world need to unite and raise their voice against capitalism. The IWA-RFC initiative started by the WSWS and ICFI is very commendable.

Bahadur: We, the sufferers, know very well that all the workers of the world face injustice, but still the workers do not understand. We are workers, but if we come together, the workers can make anyone give in, that is why I request the brothers to fight together and I wholeheartedly thank the organization for fighting for the workers.

WSWS: You have spent 10 years in prison for crimes you did not commit. Please describe the conditions in prison. Were you let out of prison to attend any functions?

Mahan: In jail we faced big hardships and much sorrow. To attend any functions, first we had to get permission from the court and then we were allowed to attend.

Bahadur: It is true that we spent 10 years in jail for a crime we never committed. The condition of the jail is like being in hell while living. There are all kinds of problems in eating, drinking, bathing and washing in the jail. We used to spend Rs.7,000 every month in the jail! The family was unable to pay many times. However, our families took full care of our children and the union also took full care of them. Because of the family and the union, we passed our time in jail.

WSWS: Why do you think they finally let you out of prison now after 10 years?

Mahan: They did not allow us to come still; this is a rule of the court, under which we have got bail.

Bahadur: We followed the rules made by the government and the court to come out of jail. That is why we are now out of jail. The rule of the court is that after serving one-fourth of the sentence, the prisoner gets bail. So today we are out on bail.

WSWS: What restrictions have they imposed on you as a part of your bail?

Mahan: For our bail, we had to pay or pledge two lakh rupees (Rs. 200,000 or about \$2,700) to come out. The restriction is that we cannot do any illegal work outside.

Bahadur: After getting bail, there is a restriction on us that neither can we go to the company gate nor can we walk within the company property. We are also forbidden to give speeches anywhere in Gurgaon.

WSWS: Have you been able to find any work to make a living? How have your families been coping?

Mahan: We have not got any work for our living till now. No one gives us any work. Our family is very sad and living in poverty.

Bahadur: Till now we have not been able to find any permanent work but we are definitely doing small jobs to support our family. You know that after coming out of jail 10 years later, it becomes very difficult to find work. Some are definitely trying for a career. To do good work, there should be a good amount of money like opening a shop, etc. Right now, we are unable to do this. I fear that the punishment will never go off and remain with us for the rest of our lives.

WSWS: Do you have any other thoughts you would like to convey to workers in other countries?

Mahan: There is an essential need for workers of all countries to unite and maintain their unity against the bourgeoisie.

Bahadur: I want to give a message to all the workers of the world that just as we raise the slogan “We are one,” in the same way we should remain united. Nothing will be achieved by raising slogans. As long as we do not give up casteism, Hindu-Muslim division, we will remain oppressed like this. If we want to get respect as human beings, then

everyone will have to raise their voice together. On my behalf, I salute all the workers of the country and abroad. Thank you, fellow comrades, for considering it worth listening to our views. We are with all the workers and will continue to raise our voice for them.



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