

Tamil Nadu government attempts to violently break up month-long strike by Samsung India workers

Yuvan Darwin, Nandha Kumar
11 October 2024

Tamil Nadu's pro-investor DMK state government is seeking to crush a militant strike by around 1,500 workers at a plant on the outskirts of Chennai owned and operated by global tech manufacturer Samsung.

On Tuesday and Wednesday the government deployed police to attack the workers and their recently established union. Late Tuesday evening, police arbitrarily and illegally arrested ten office bearers in the union, before detaining several striking workers in a separate incident Wednesday. The crackdown came in the wake of demands by India's national government, led by the Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party or BJP, for the Tamil Nadu state government to swiftly bring the job action to a halt.

The strike is taking place at Samsung India's Sriperumbatur assembly plant located about 45 km from Chennai, the state capital. The workers have been on strike since September 9 without pay. They are demanding an end to brutal working conditions, a reduction in their long mandatory working hours and higher pay. They are also demanding the official registration of the newly formed Samsung India Workers Union (SIWU) and its recognition by the plant management. Formed by the workers in July of this year, the SIWU has affiliated with the Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the trade union federation led by the Stalinist CPM (Communist Party of India, Marxist) which is a close ally and electoral partner of the pro-business DMK.

Acting in close consort with plant management, the DMK government has refused SIWU registration, since the plant management is adamantly opposed to the presence of a trade union at its plant. This is despite a statutory right to union registration within 45 days and workers enjoying a constitutional right to form their own trade union, which in Tamil Nadu as across India is never or practically never enforced.

In an open act of intimidation by the blatantly pro-Samsung DMK government, police were sent to knock on the doors of the ten union office bearers late Tuesday night,

to take them into "preventive custody." These illegal arrests were made despite the fact that the CITU, which is leading the strike, has meticulously stuck to the most minimal forms of peaceful state-sanctioned protest. It has kept the Samsung workers' struggle completely isolated by deliberately not mobilizing the many thousands of workers it represents in numerous multinational companies located in the industrial zone where the Samsung plant is situated.

In a separate incident on October 8, a van carrying a group of Samsung workers overturned, with the workers in the van subsequently asserting that it was sabotaged by forces hostile to the strike. Five workers were injured. Instead of coming to the workers' aid, a police sub-inspector harassed them, with the result that irate workers pushed him to the ground.

Seizing upon this, the police arrested 8 workers and charged them with various criminal offenses, including causing "hurt to deter public servants from carrying on their duty." After a Habeas Corpus writ was filed by the SIWU President and CITU leader Muthukumar, the police released all the workers, but not without first compelling them to furnish surety bonds. Instead of severely reprimanding the police for their egregious violation of the workers' right to protection against arrest under false pretenses, the Madras High Court simply closed the case.

The police also set up arbitrary checkpoints to check the identities of striking workers. So high-handed were the police that one of them even boarded a public bus and demanded to see the company identification card from uniform-wearing Samsung workers, outraging other passengers.

Additionally, the police on Wednesday swooped into the protest site, located about 1.5 km from the plant, and violently dismantled the large tent the workers had erected to shelter themselves from heat and rain. The police then arbitrarily detained hundreds of workers present in various wedding halls without any charges and later released them.

These violent actions are in line with Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Stalin's drive attract to foreign capital. Under successive DMK governments, Tamil Nadu has become a choice destination for transnationals such as Samsung, Foxconn and various other global corporations. The state has provided all sorts of benefits to attract these corporations, including generous tax breaks, building infrastructure using public funds and cheap land. Most importantly, however, the state has served as a cheap labour haven for these corporations.

In August, Stalin made a 17-day trip to the United States, where he met with various executives of top transnational corporations. He went there to tout the benefits of Tamil Nadu as a cheap-labour haven and sought to lure them into investing by promising all sorts of financial incentives. He was reportedly able to drum up investment pledges totaling 75 billion Rupees (\$893 million).

The strike has caused concern in India's BJP government, since it is seen as tarnishing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "Make in India" initiative. It is aimed at making India an alternative manufacturing hub to China by easing business regulations and maintaining low wages through ruthless state repression of workers.

India's Labour Minister, Mansukh Mandaviya, addressed a letter to Chief Minister Stalin in which he demanded that the Tamil Nadu government intervene in the dispute to force an "early and amicable" resolution, according to Reuters.

Stalin's ministers have conspired with the autocratic Samsung India management to break the strike. This is underscored by the fawning statement made by an official spokesperson for the company: 'We are cognizant of the Tamil Nadu government's efforts to end the illegal strike and are thankful to the authorities for their constant support.'

In contrast, SIWU President and CITU leader Muthukumar stated to the daily *Times of India*: 'We held talks with the ministers. But they did not agree to our major demands.'

Various ministers of the DMK government have held several rounds of talks with union and company officials, all with the goals of sabotaging the strike and getting the workers to go back to work. Industry Minister Raja exemplified the hostility of the DMK government towards the workers, recently lecturing them, "Rivals can take advantage of the strike and divert the attention from real issues. The government and the Chief Minister stand by you. Return to work in the interest of jobs for the youth and employment opportunities in the State."

To split the workers, Samsung Management recently announced that it has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with what it termed a "Workers' Committee," that is with a small handful of workers it has been able to intimidate or buy off.

The company stated that it would pay a monthly increment of 5,000 rupees (\$60) from October 1 to March 2025. It also promised to add more air-conditioned buses for transporting workers and improve the quality of food in the cafeteria. In the case of the death of a worker at the plant, Samsung India would pay a measly Rs. 100,000 (\$1190) to the worker's family.

The plant, which manufactures home appliances such as refrigerators and washing machines, is a critical facility for the company, accounting for 20 percent of its \$12 billion revenue last year. The rest of the revenue came from the sale of cell phones, which the company assembles at its plant in Noida, a town in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

The MoU was rejected by the striking workers. At the same time however, the CITU, which is appealing to the pro-business DMK government to be "reasonable," has indicated that it will call a halt to the strike if the SIWU union is registered and recognized. In other words, the CITU is willing to make some rotten compromise with the plant management about low pay, long hours of work and working conditions. Currently, Samsung workers are compelled to work 11 hours a day for 4 days in a week, with 3 hours paid at double the normal hourly rate.

The position taken by the CITU leaders goes to show that the CITU will function as an entirely pliant agency of management and the state. The CITU has a long history of leading workers' strikes to defeat, despite workers showing great courage and militancy. For example, in 2010 the CITU made the workers at Foxconn and BYD completely surrender to management after the workers had waged a bitter and determined struggle for better wages and working conditions for close to two months.

This is entirely in keeping with the rotten politics of its parent party, the Stalinist CPM, which has long been in a political coalition with the DMK and on the national level is aligned with the Congress Party, for decades the Indian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government. The CPM along with other left parties, including the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist (Liberation) have long promoted the DMK as a progressive friend of the working class. In reality, Chief Minister Stalin, as shown by his attempt to use police violence to break the strike, is determined to overcome any obstacle that would taint the reputation of Tamil Nadu as a business-friendly state.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact