

Samsung India workers speak out after CITU's betrayal of their 37-day strike

Yuvan Darwin, Martina Inessa
30 October 2024

The Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the trade union federation of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, abruptly terminated the militant 37-day strike of about 1,500 permanent workers at Samsung India's Tamil Nadu household-appliance manufacturing plant on 15 October, 2024. It did this on the orders of the state's DMK government, which itself was acting at the behest of global capital and India's far-right, BJP-led national government.

The CITU called off the strike without the rank and file having any say, and without achieving any of the workers' demands. First among these was state registration of the newly organized, CITU-affiliated Samsung India Workers Union (SIWU)—which under Tamil Nadu and Indian law is the workers' legal and constitutional right.

The employees involved in the strike were ordered to resume work from October 17. When they reported to work that day, Samsung management did not allow them to resume their normal work duties. Instead, management instructed them to go through mandatory "training," a browbeating session by management, for one week prior to resuming their work.

They were also told that they will receive this so-called training sequentially in separate groups of 150 workers stretching into December, and that those who "fail" will be purged from the workforce.

This week, the second batch of 150 employees commenced their one-week session. The ones who have not been called yet for these weekly sessions are in the dark about when they will be able to start working again to receive their regular wages. The workers have been without a pay-cheque since they commenced their 37-day strike on September 9.

The CITU, on the other hand, continues to celebrate this utter capitulation and rotten betrayal to the management and to the Tamil Nadu DMK government as a historic "victory." A victory that, according to long-time CITU functionary and SIWU leader E. Muthukumar, "the world is looking at with wonder" and has "made the workers happy."

On October 26, leaders of the CPM, its Stalinist sister party, the Communist Party of India (CPI), and the Tamil nationalist VCK—all of whom are in an electoral/political alliance with the DMK in Tamil Nadu—met with DMK President and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin to "thank him" for his intervention to resolve the Samsung Electronics workers strike "amicably."

In fact, the DMK government repeatedly deployed the police to

intimidate, detain and violently attack the strikers, and actively blocked the registration of the newly-formed SIWU despite the fact union organisation is a statutory right in Tamil Nadu.

The CITU refused to mobilize the working class in defence of the Samsung workers. Nor did it make any real effort, before or during the strike, to win the support of the contract workers at the strike-bound plant, bowing to the divisions that Samsung, like employers across India including those that are government-owned (PSUs), use to split the working class.

When the DMK signalled that it was prepared to break its alliance with the CPM if the Stalinists didn't do their bidding and end the strike forthwith, they immediately complied, signing a sell-out tripartite agreement.

As the WSWS warned it would do, Samsung management is continuing its attack on the workers. It is using the so-called "training meetings" to try to intimidate the workers into affixing their signatures to a document "recognizing" the phony "Workers' Committee" it set up in opposition to the SIWU as their "representative."

In response, the Stalinist leaders are pleading with the South Korean-based transnational to work with them as a better mechanism for containing and suppressing rank-and-file worker opposition and thereby boosting productivity and profits.

In a statement denouncing management's blatant attempts to cajole the workers into signing up with the "Workers Committee," E. Muthukumar, the CITU-imposed chairman of the SIWU, declared, "CITU is always ready to join hands with them [management] for such industrial peace, productivity and growth of the company."

"CITU workers want peace and we are guiding them to help them in production, so we hereby declare that it is the duty of Samsung management to preserve this industrial peace after long struggle without prejudice."

This declaration of the CITU's readiness to work with management to police the Samsung workers, if the company allows it to "organize" the workers, is entirely in keeping with the role the Stalinist CPM and CITU have played for decades. They have isolated and suppressed militant workers struggles, while supporting right-wing governments, many of them led by the DMK in Tamil Nadu and Congress Party nationally, that have imposed pro-investor policies and integrated India ever more fully into US imperialism's military-strategic offensive against China.

"We believed in the CITU, but they have left us by the

wayside”

Samsung workers who were reluctant to talk to the WSWs during the strike, under conditions where the CITU bureaucrats forbade them from doing so, are now eager to speak out. Many feel terribly frustrated and betrayed. The workers, who asked for anonymity for the fear of being victimized by both Samsung management and the CITU, explained what it is to work at the factory and their thoughts on the CITU's surrender before the DMK's violent anti-strike campaign.

Vasanth, a permanent worker at Samsung who participated in the strike made the following bitter comments:

“We have the right to strike against the Samsung factory's exploitation. However, the Tamil Nadu government, led by the DMK, used the police force to suppress our protest. We believed in the CITU. But, I think that they have left us by the wayside. When we went to resume work on Thursday, October 17, in accordance with the agreement reached during the tripartite conciliation meeting on October 15, the management informed us that we would not be permitted to work until we finished the one-week training that would be provided by the management, which would divide the workers into groups of 150 each.”

He continued, “I am confused, what did we strike for? Why were we told to go back inside? Believing (what the union said), we went in hope to the company on 17th October, but Samsung management forbade us from working. Our livelihood is in question, and we have no idea what the future holds. We don't know what will happen to us.

“DMK acts as the backbone of the Samsung management. And this is the situation we are in for having trusted the CITU. The outcome of the strike is unclear to us. When it comes to who won the strike, the employees or Samsung, I think that the Samsung won. The management now commands us not to enter the factory and only to come to the factory when we are told to do so by them by letter. But only 150 workers got an email and went for training and now another 150 workers are in training. But we are not sure when this training will end and we can resume work and get our salary.

“Usually, we had to work from 8 a.m. to 5:20 p.m. but we were not paid for the last 20 minutes. And, our bus would leave at 5:30 p.m. so that we would have to run to get the bus or else we'd have to pay for public transportation. This when we working for the company six days in a week and generally doing an extra three hours in OT (overtime). This is how we have treated by the Samsung management.”

Another Samsung worker, Madhan, a contract worker aged around 24 who has been employed at Samsung for about a year, said that he too is made to work 6 days each week. He receives a gross monthly salary of about 15,000 rupees (about US\$ 175), but only about gets 13,000 rupees, after Provident Fund (a mandatory retirement savings account where both the employee and employer contribute equally) is subtracted. Prior to joining Samsung, he spent four years working as a contract employee for other companies.

“I have to put in an additional two hours of overtime on each of the 6 working days. Even though many other contract workers have access to company buses, I do not. So I have to walk 2 km

each day to the Samsung plant from my rental room.”

Contract workers are also treated differently when it comes to basic bus amenities and canteen meals. Madhan explained, “The employees in my line are permitted to have only one meal in the company canteen. During the Samsung workers' strike, I didn't get work for two days per week from September 9 to October 15.”

“I left Samsung because of management's ill-treatment”

Another young Samsung contract worker, Kani (name changed), said, “I have been working in the washing-machine manufacturing line at Samsung India Electronics for about five months. I have been working as a contract worker in various other companies for 8 years. But I could never find a permanent job. So, I find it difficult to have a decent livelihood. Since I lost my parents, I don't have any home and am forced to stay in a rental room with the little money that I earn everyday as a contract worker.”

Eniyan, an auto rickshaw driver now aged around 35 years old worked for Samsung as a permanent employee, from 2011 to 2016. When he joined in 2011, he got Rs. 3,500 as his salary. When he left the company in 2016, he was getting Rs. 15,000.

“The company,” he said, “made the workers work 12 hours each day, even though the normal working day is supposed to be 9 hours. I worked from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. I got Rs. 60 per hour for overtime. I left the company because of ill treatment by the factory management. If the workers left the assembly line to take relief, they would not be allowed back and made to stand outside. I was insulted by Samsung management like that. And when I resisted, I would be given heavy work.

“I welcome the Samsung workers' strike for union rights,” continued Eniyan. “Only when workers get united, can they win their rights. When I was working there, no one was there for me to stand with. Ultimately, due to management's mistreatment and harassment, I left Samsung.

He then spoke about the strike's outcome and the need for workers to chart a new course based on methods of class struggle in opposition to the entire capitalist establishment. “When CITU is affiliated with the CPI (M) and the CPI (M) is politically in alliance with the DMK-led government, which is itself fully backing Samsung, how would CITU act against the Samsung management?”

“I accept the WSWs's proposal that the formation of rank-and-file committees in which both contract and permanent workers are united is the only way forward. Such workers' independent rank and file committee could successfully challenge the Samsung management. Also, I agree that the mobilization of working class in other industries in the Suvichatram and Sriperumbudur industrial belt is the solution to win our demands. Ultimately, we need to get other Samsung workers in Noida, South Korea, and internationally to unite.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact