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Indian police detain thousands of striking Tamil Nadu auto workers

On Tuesday, police arrested over 2,000 striking auto workers from the Oragadam industrial hub near Chennai, the capital of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

The arrested workers, who are employed at the Yamaha India, Royal Enfield and Myyoung Shin India Automotive (MSI) plants, were detained in three wedding halls in the town of Oragadam. They were released without charge in the evening.

The police crackdown took place on Tuesday morning as workers marched to the Kanchipuram administration office as part of a protracted dispute over cuts to wages, conditions and the victimisation of militant workers. The rally was called by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU).



Striking

workers surrounded by police

The mass roundup was part of a broader assault on Indian car workers enforced by the global auto conglomerates, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led central government, the official opposition parties and state authorities, including the police and the courts.

The striking workers have, over the past month, been subjected to police raids, attempts to suppress their demonstrations and repeated mass arrests.

These attacks are of a piece with the sentencing, early last year, of 13 workers to life imprisonment by a court in the northern state of Haryana. They were framed up for organising an independent union, which spearheaded a struggle against cuts to wages and conditions at Japanese multinational Maruti Suzuki's Haryana plant.

Last week, a Haryana court [threw out](#) a case filed by the workers to be released on bail until their appeals are heard.

Yamaha India and Royal Enfield employees have been on strike for the past month. MSI workers began industrial action 50 days ago.

The Yamaha workers walked out to demand the reinstatement of two sacked colleagues who were organising the Yamaha Thozhilalar Sangham or Yamaha Motor Workers Association, affiliated to the CITU. The Enfield and MSI struggles erupted over the victimisation of workers trying to unions and higher pay.

Workers are also facing the threat of sackings, amid a broader onslaught on industrial jobs. Management at the Honeywell manufacturing company, which is also in the Oragadam industrial zone, suddenly retrenched workers in September, giving them just two months wages in compensation.

Around 800 workers from Yamaha India, 1,500 from Royal Enfield and 200 from MSI participated in Tuesday's rally.



Auto workers taking part in the march

The CITU, which is controlled by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, has sought to prevent any broader mobilisation of workers in Tamil Nadu and across the country. Instead it has directed workers to make impotent appeals to the courts and other state authorities.

A week ago, the CITU filed a case appealing for court intervention to prevent the auto companies from retrenching workers. The union organised Tuesday's march to demand that the "State and Central government intervene immediately" to settle the dispute.

As the frame-up of the Maruti Suzuki workers makes clear, India's courts function as the ruthless defenders of big business against workers.

The Tamil Nadu state government, to which the CITU is appealing, is headed by the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), which has a long record of attacking workers rights.

AIADMK is backing the right-wing BJP central government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which is expanding contract and casual labour, as part of an assault on workers' rights and conditions aimed at attracting international investment.

The Maoist-affiliated Working People Trade Union Council also took part in Tuesday's protest. It made no criticism of the CPM's open promotion of the courts and AIADMK.

Addressing the assembled workers, A. Soundararajan, a CPM leader and Tamil Nadu leader of the CITU, spelt out the union's subservience to the state authorities.

Sensing that the workers wanted to resist the police intervention and defend their democratic right to protest, Soundararajan called for calm and for strikers to accept their detention.

“It’s better to be in the prison than being in the factory prison,” Soundararajan cynically declared. “Today we will get arrested peacefully and I appeal to comrades for cooperation.”



A section of the strikers

He begged the authorities to “take action against the management for causing this strike.” Soundararajan condemned the company for failing to follow the labour commissioner’s advice that the victimised workers be reinstated in order to defuse the stoppage.

Soundararajan made no criticism of the big business parties, which are implementing free market policies to enable international investors to set-up special economic zones based on poverty wages and appalling working conditions. The CPM-led Left Front implemented similar anti-working class policies when it controlled state governments in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura.

The CITU leader bemoaned the fact that the companies had boycotted meetings with the unions organised by the district administrator on Tuesday. He declared: “If this struggle is not resolved within the next 14 days, we are going to give notice that our 40 unions in this region will go on strike and we will take this struggle in many forms across the state.”

These comments were nothing more than empty rhetoric. The union has repeatedly made clear that it is working in league with the companies and state authorities to sell out the strike.

This was underscored by a union statement after the arrests. It denounced the AIADMK government for “letting loose police repression on the workers,” then issued yet another appeal for it to “intervene” in the dispute.

WSWS reporters spoke to workers at Tuesday’s rally.

Kathir, a 27-year-old Yamaha India worker said: “Our main demand is for the reinstatement of two sacked workers. We are also calling for the recognition of our union. “We want a salary hike. I used to work at another auto company. I joined with the hope of becoming a permanent worker. Though I am now permanent, my salary is very low. Most of the two-wheeler companies provide [monthly] salaries with a starting payment of only 25,000 rupees [\$US340].”

“Management is bullying workers to force us to obey company rules. Only then will they let us to return to work. We are determined to continue the fight for our rights.”

Selvam, another Yamaha India worker, said: “We have the right to form a union. We will continue the fight for reinstatement of all sacked workers.”