

Free the framed-up Maruti Suzuki workers!

The key facts of the case

22 March 2017

Thirteen autoworkers in India have been condemned to life imprisonment after being framed up on murder charges stemming from a July 2012 confrontation at a Maruti Suzuki car assembly plant on the outskirts of Delhi, India's capital city.

Those sentenced to rot in India's notorious prisons include the entire 12-member executive of the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU) at the Manesar, Haryana plant. All the workers are victims of a ruthless vendetta mounted by the corporation, the police and judicial authorities, with the full complicity of India's principal political parties—the Congress Party and the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

These workers are totally innocent. Their only “crime” was to challenge the sweatshop conditions imposed by the Japanese-based transnational corporation with the aid of a pro-company, stooge union.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site* have initiated an international defense campaign to demand the immediate release of Ram Meher, Sandeep Dhillon, Ram Bilas, Sarabjeet Singh, Pawan Kumar, Sohan Kumar, Ajmer Singh, Suresh Kumar, Amarjeet, Dhanraj Bambi, Pradeep Gujjar, Yogesh and Jiyalal.

The background to the case

In March 2012, after months of walkouts, sit-down strikes, and other actions mounted in defiance of a company-controlled union, the Manesar Maruti-Suzuki workers forced the company to recognize the MSWU as a first step to realizing their demands. These included abolition of the hated contract labor system, which pays thousands of temporary workers 14,000 rupees (US \$214) a month, or less than half the salary of permanent workers. Four months later, on July 18, 2012, management provoked an altercation on the

factory floor. While workers were defending themselves from an army of private security thugs, a fire of mysterious origin broke out. The fire claimed the life of human resource manager Awanish Kumar Dev, who was overcome by smoke.

There is not a shred of evidence that connects any of the framed-up workers to the fire or to Dev's death. Moreover, he would have been the last one workers wanted to harm, since he was the one manager at the factory who was sympathetic to the workers. He had even helped them to register the MSWU with the Haryana Labour Department.

The fire was the crux of the prosecution's murder case. Yet it could not establish where, when or how the fire started. The authorities did claim to have found a matchbox, which supposedly escaped detention during the initial investigation of the fire and inexplicably survived unscathed in an area destroyed by the blaze. Nothing ties this matchbox to any of the workers.

The police crackdown

The July 18 events were used by the company and Indian authorities as a pretext for a massive crackdown on workers. Beginning the very next day, police smashed into workers' homes and beat and detained hundreds of workers.

Suzuki then purged the Manesar workforce, firing and replacing 2,300 workers.

Defense lawyers soon began to expose the state frame-up against the almost 150 workers police formally arrested and jailed. They showed police had worked off lists of “suspects” supplied by management and that 89 of the workers had been arrested on the basis of names provided by police in alphabetically organized allotments by four Maruti Suzuki contractors. Thus, one “eyewitness” only saw “rioting workers” whose names began with a first letter from A

to G, another only those with names in the G-P range, and so on. At the trial itself, these and other witnesses were systematically unable to identify the workers they had implicated.

Despite these and many other inconsistencies and fabrications, 148 workers were held for more than three years in jail, where police, according to civil rights groups, subjected them to torture. In denying them bail, authorities declared that they had to restore the confidence of global investors and demonstrate that they would not face “labor unrest” in India.

In convicting the 13 workers of murder and 18 other workers of lesser crimes, the Gurgaon District court had to willfully ignore its own finding that there had been collusion between the police and Maruti Suzuki management and fabrication of evidence.

Indeed so full of holes and dubious was the prosecution’s evidence, the court had to exonerate 117 workers—workers who prosecutors had vehemently claimed till the very end were just as guilty as the rest.

Why the Maruti Suzuki workers were targeted

In the 14 months that preceded the mass arrests and frame-up, the Manesar Maruti Suzuki workers had become a focal point of workers’ resistance across the huge Manesar-Gurgaon industrial belt, raising the ire of the corporate bosses and the political establishment. The Congress Party-led Haryana state government repeatedly mobilized police en masse to break workers’ actions and suggested that the MSWU was in cahoots with “terrorists” and other “outsiders” determined to “sabotage” the state’s economy.

The prosecution, in its closing argument, demanded savage retribution against the Maruti Suzuki workers, claiming their actions were a threat to the BJP national government’s “Made in India” program. That is, they were a threat to its drive to undercut China and make India the sweatshop of the world by supplying the transnational corporations with cheap and compliant labor.

The defense of the Maruti Suzuki workers is an international issue and a responsibility of the international working class. Transnational corporations like Suzuki scour the world to find the cheapest labor costs. Meanwhile, governments are criminalizing worker resistance.

There is no time to lose! If this travesty is not

reversed and the Maruti Suzuki workers freed, it will embolden not only the Indian ruling elite, but the corporate and financial aristocracy in every country.

The Indian prison system is a living hell. Many of the families of the framed-up workers are facing destitution with their sole breadwinners behind bars. Maruti Suzuki has also served notice it considers the life sentences too lenient. Company attorneys have vowed to appeal the March 18 judgment, so as to press for the punishment that the prosecution demanded for the 13: death by hanging.

The attack on the Maruti Suzuki workers is part of the war being waged against the working class throughout the world. Justice for these workers will not be obtained by appealing to capitalist courts, to the Indian political establishment, or the major unions, which are all tied to this establishment and, consequently, have systemically isolated the persecuted workers.

Workers around the world and all those who defend democratic rights must come to the aid of the courageous Maruti Suzuki workers and demand their immediate release.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>