

Hard Driving The Workers

Cover Story

How Maruti Suzuki's struggle to speed-up production by eliminating 'free time' on the shopfloor landed the company in unending 'union trouble' and ruined workers' lives



Silence greets you at the door of the house where Sumit Narayan's in-laws live. Sumit is among 35 Maruti Suzuki workers who have spent the past three years or more in prison as undertrials accused of murder.

On 18 July 2012, 147 workers from Maruti Suzuki India Ltd's automobile factory in Manesar, near Gurgaon in Haryana, were arrested after the death of a manager when fire broke out in the premises. Two more were arrested later. The incident took place following years of agitation against the management's alleged attacks on the workers' freedom to form or join the union of their choice and strike work to press their demands.

Criminal charges — 'rioting', 'murder' and so on — were slapped on all the arrested workers. So far, 114 of the undertrials have been released on bail.

At Sumit's in-laws' house, the silence signals fear — an emotion triggered by news that workers of Pricol Private Ltd, a company in Tamil Nadu, were sentenced for "double life imprisonment" in a similar case. At Pricol, too, a manager died in September 2009 in the midst of workers' agitation and the protesting workers

were accused of murder.

What if the Pricol verdict influences the court while deciding on the fate of Maruti workers? That fear is playing on the minds of Sumit's kin. A toy gun in his hand, Sumit's three-year-old son breaks the silence with a question: "Can you tell me when my father will come home?" This correspondent could only respond with silence.

The three-year-old is unaware of the charges against his father, whom he has only seen behind bars, and only during visiting hours. No wonder the first question he asks any stranger is about when he can see his father free and outside jail.

Satbir Singh, the father-in law, hesitates before talking about Sumit. "He is more than a son-in-law to me," he says. "He is an orphan and I see him as my own son. I cannot marry off my daughter to someone else. We know he has been falsely accused, and we won't stop fighting for him until he is cleared of all charges and released."

On 4 December, a court in Coimbatore sentenced eight Pricol workers to double life terms, while acquitting 19 others. The workers were being tried for the murder of the company's vice-president (Human Resource) on 21 September 2009. The incident had taken place during protests against the sacking of 42 workers as part of the management's alleged bid to crush their efforts to organise themselves. Despite striking parallels with the better-reported Maruti case, there was barely a murmur in the media following the sentencing of the "Pricol Eight".

"Isn't it unjust to trap workers in false cases and jail them for two life terms?" asks Amit, an activist with Workers Solidarity Centre. "It is even more unjust in a country where people responsible for the deaths of thousands are venerated by many as great leaders. The verdict is against the struggle of workers to get their rights enforced and seek a better life."

Amit, who has seen the Maruti struggle from close quarters, recalls that the workers had travelled to Tamil Nadu more than once to express their solidarity with the struggle at Pricol. There were also protests against the judgment at New Delhi's "protest enclave" around Jantar Mantar by activists of the CPI(ML) Liberation.

Kavita Krishnan, politburo member of the party, calls it a "miscarriage of justice in light of the lack of evidence to prosecute the workers." "The judgement, clearly, is not just against the eight Pricol workers but also against the larger worker's movement in India," she says.

G Ramakrishnan, Tamil Nadu state secretary of CPM, calls it an "anti-worker judgment". Questioning double life imprisonment, he says, "It is meant to send a clear message to the workers union that their struggle against neoliberal economic policies will not be tolerated."

Another CPI (ML) leader at the Jantar Mantar protest alleges that the eight workers were victimised because they had been fighting against the "anti-union activities" of the company, including arbitrary dismissals and transfers. He alleged that the company showered gifts on the "pro-management internal union" and refused to recognise the Kovai Mavatta Pricol Trade Union formed by the workers.

In the Maruti case, too, the undertrials' kin claim that the cases are false. "According to the postmortem report of the dead manager," says the father of an undertrial, "he died due to suffocation caused because of the fire and his injuries were below the knees." Some of the kin allege that the management wanted something like that to happen so that it could use it as a pretext to crush the workers' struggle.

Retired post office clerk Avtar Singh, father of Saravjeet Singh, a leading activist of the Maruti union, has done

all he could to secure his son's release. Many like him have also knocked on the doors of the Maruti management, which refuses to acknowledge their grievances. They are only told that the company no longer has anything to do with the case as it is now between the State and the workers. Then they go and meet the ministers, only to return disappointed.

Maruti Suzuki India Ltd, which started operations at its Manesar factory in 2006, is the biggest employer in the region. The company was set up in 1983 as one of the first major industries in Gurgaon and played a crucial role in its development as one of the best-known industrial hubs in the country. Today, hundreds of factories have mushroomed around it but none comes close in terms of the number of people employed.

On a foggy December morning, hundreds of workers from a nearby village called Aliyar are gathering near the gates of the Maruti factory. They are wearing T-shirts in two different colours. Those wearing cream-coloured shirts are the permanent workers while the "temps" (temporary workers) wear violet.

"Temps" were introduced to replace the older contract system of hiring workers, after the conflict in Maruti started in the summer of 2011. But even today the management is greeted with protests by workers in the factory. Recently, hundreds of temps refused to enter the premises unless the management negotiated with them over the issue of salary. The management called in the police to disperse the temps, alleging that they fought with the locals who were trying to persuade them to resume work. An fir was lodged against a former Maruti employee, who was among the 2,000-odd workers sacked in 2012 during the worker's agitation.

Until July 2012, workers had struck work thrice in defence of their right to form their own union, leading eventually to the clash with the management on the 18th of that month. It was then that a fire broke out in the factory premises and a manager was killed.

Criminal cases on protesters, though, has not helped resolve the conflict between the management and the workers. For instance, on 29 November this year, thousands of workers demonstrated for the release of their colleagues and withdrawal of cases against those who were declared "absconding".

Bail has been refused repeatedly to 35 workers on the ground that the prosecution witnesses could identify them. The district court in Gurgaon rejected the workers' bail plea thrice. The High Court of Punjab and Haryana turned it down twice. The first time, in May 2013, Justice KC Puri observed: "The incident is most unfortunate occurrence which has lowered the reputation of India in the estimation of the world. Foreign investors are not likely to invest the money in India out of fear of labour unrest. (sic)"

Measures taken to address the foreign investors' "fear of labour unrest" have resulted in denial of livelihood to those who fought for the right to organise themselves in Maruti. As "sacked Maruti workers" branded as "troublemakers", few employers are willing to risk hiring them.

Conflict with its workers has also cost the company dear. It lost six percent of market share in FY 2011-12 and the bottom line dropped by Rs 2,500 crore. The "temp" system of hiring was introduced as a measure to reduce chances of further "trouble", the workers point out.

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