

தொழிலாளர் கூடம் (Thozhilalar koodam)

A blog on labour issues in Tamil Nadu

Make in India: carrots to the corporate—lathis to the Workers

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Interview with Honda Takhupera workers on their exploitation and state repression

The surprising thing about Honda plant at Takhupera, Rajasthan is that it has not been in the news lately. On February 16th, it was a scene of an attack on striking workers by police and hired bouncers. Over a 100 workers got severely injured and in all 44 were arrested and were accused of attempting to murder policemen, causing rioting by stone pelting. Last week we spoke to three of the permanent workers in Delhi. All three were between 22 and 24 years of age and told us in great detail about the hardships all the workers faced at the factory, their attempt at forming an Union for all the workers at the factory and the subsequent attack on them by the Management and the State Government. The names of the three workers are withheld for consent reasons and we will just refer to them as K, U and A.

Q : Can you briefly tell us about the factory and your involvement in the production?

U : This plant was formed in 2011. The total workforce was approximately 4000 workers out of which a mere 472 were permanent and the rest were contract workers hired through various agents. Including all the allowances,

permanent workers salary currently stands at 22,000 and salary of contract workers has been around 10,000. Even though they did exactly the same job as us.

A : Most of the permanent workers like the three of us joined in 2011 when we were directly recruited from various technical institutes. We joined as trainees and worked for 3 years. After which for 6 months we were made provisional workers and finally made permanent. We had a remarkable rise in our salaries when we became provisional workers from trainees. 20 rupees per month was increased!

K : We are stressing on the time period to show that we had to work hard to become permanent. It is fair to say that we have literally built this plant and took great pride in that.

Q : Can you briefly tell us, what were the conditions which compelled you to unionise?

K : The working conditions in general were very harsh and management wasn't ready to listen to any of our long list of complaints. We realised that a joint union of permanent and contract workers will be the only way to bring management onto the negotiating table.

U: There was no transport service available to travel from our plant to where we were all staying. So we had to take autos. In an auto which can accommodate 7-8 people, there used to be over 30 people every night! You cannot imagine the hardships we faced while travelling at the end of our eight and a half hour shifts due to this. The areas we live in are filled with goons and we faced regular harassment from them in the night. This is why we demanded transportation for a long period but management didn't pay any attention to this request. The quality

of food in canteen was for lack of a stronger word, abysmal. There were cockroaches found in our food regularly and if we complained, the supervisor will say eat whatever you are given otherwise starve. We were forced to do overtime regularly even when we didn't want to.

A : One of our comrades was recently forced to do overtime 3 days on a trot and when he refused on forth day, supervisor slapped him. This is how we were treated on the shop floor. The contract workers were treated even worse. If any contract worker took even one day leave on medical ground, he would be told that his contract wont be renewed after a year. On the smallest of excuses, the permanent workers were insulted and contract workers were asked to leave.

K : The factory assembles various Honda two wheelers like Activa. Parts come from outside, and the cycle time to assemble one scooter is a mere 22 seconds. There are two different assembly lines. There are no relievers and so except the half an hour lunch break and two tea breaks, we work continuously. One of the major complaints we had was regarding safety provisions at the factory. No safety equipments were provided and if a contract worker asked for it, he was immediately removed. If a Permanent worker asked for it, he was warned of serious consequences and just asked to focus on his job. Once while working on the assembly lines, a rotating bar hit my face and my right cheek burst out open. I first didn't realise it, but as soon as blood literally started pouring out, one of my friends standing in front of me told me about it. I called out to one of the supervisors. He came and asked me what happened. When i described it to him, he said he had some other work and I should go to the HR (Human Resource) department. When I went there, they just gave me 500 rupees, called a friend of mine and told him to take me to a private clinic and told me not to come to work for 2 days.

A : Sometimes when certain inspectors from outside were going to come to inspect the factory, we would be asked to stop and clean the lines. This will result in loss of production for few hours and to make up for that cycle time will be reduced to 20 seconds, and we will have to work even faster. It is incredible that first it is us who has to clean those lines and then work faster for loss of cycle time. Many times due to some administrative error, line will stop (like if some parts were late in arriving) and even to make up for that they will reduce the cycle time. Overall the treatment was really harsh and inhuman.

Q : When did you start the process of unionization and what was management's attitude towards it?

A : The decision to unionise all the workers was taken on 26th July 2015 and we started the registration process on 6th August of that year. We had taken signature of almost all the 4000 workers who were in favour of forming the union. 227 were main representatives whose names had been submitted during the registration process. However there was no progress with registration. Initially we were in a limbo as to what was happening. Recently through our lawyers we found out that civil court claims that they had sent us three notices, as to a problem in the 227 representative signatures. But incredibly enough we have never received any notice till recently. The notice says that the management had submitted affidavits on behalf of 21 of these 227 workers which claimed that they were not in favour of unionisation ! Those 21 workers are still with us who had no knowledge of ever signing on any such affidavit. We felt badly cheated.

K : The management had thought that by getting workers from different states , there will be no unity. However they were wrong. Not only is there incredible unity among permanent workers, there was also an incurable unity with contract workers who faced even more oppression then we did.

U : Honda seems to claim they are world leaders in Automobile production. However when we asked for even essential things like safety measures the HR department will answer that we don't have such facilities here. They behave like small industries when it comes to even bare necessities of the workers.

Q : What is the current situation?

U : Situation as you know is critical. 44 of our comrades are in jail on completely fabricated charges. Many of whom were picked up from their homes after February 16th. Media has completely been silent on this issue. We have repeatedly tried to contact labour department but when we call, they say its not labour department and we have dialled wrong number ! We feel as if everyone from the media to the state is collaborating with Honda management.

At this point Honda is suspending all the permanent workers by sending suspension letters directly to their permanent addresses. All contract workers have been removed. They have brought new contract workers from various places in a haste, many of whom are barely middle school pass outs with no diploma degrees. We are getting first hand reports that in order to train these workers (as they have no technical training) they are forcing them to stay inside the factory 24 hours and have kept their degree certificates so they don't leave. However we also know that the production is stalled. It will not be so easy for them to replace us. We have been there since beginning.

K : The very same day, we struck and police attacked us, Honda created a new even more massive plant in Gujarat. So even though production stopped here, it will continue in another place on an even larger scale. In this

situation our struggle only gets harder.

A : However we are determined. Not only will we ensure our comrades get bail (they got bail 4 days after this interview was conducted) , we will continue our struggle to unionise.

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