

## **Neemrana Mazdoor Manch : Heroic initiative by Daikin Workers.**

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The Rajasthan Government has been at the forefront of embracing the neoliberal reforms trumpeted by the central government, and the last year has witnessed unprecedented repression of workers in the Guragaon-Manesar-Bawal-Tapukera-Neemrana belt, which spans the Haryana and Rajasthan industrial areas. The struggles of the workers, their effort to unionise, and the following wave of repression by the state and its machinery is seen most clearly in the heroic struggles of the workers on Honda (Tapukera plant) and Daikin (Neemrana plant).

In October 2013, 846 workers of Daikin plant in Neemrana struck work for 41 days asserting their right to form a union and demanding the reinstatement of 125 fellow workers who had been terminated by the management for being part of the process of union formation. Neemrana plant is the sole plant of Daikin enterprise in India and has an annual turnover of over 1200 crores. Despite being one of the top air-conditioning industries in the world, the conditions of workers at Neemrana plant was nothing short of inhuman. The plant produces one AC every 25 seconds and workers work for eight hours stretches with thirty minute breaks. When in February of this year a worker decided to take a piss at 11.30 am (which was not the designated break time), the line stopped and when he got back he was given a suspension letter.[1] Permanent workers who spoke to Thozhilalar Koodam told us that contract workers get kicked out of the job for absolutely nonsensical reasons, like keeping their tags in the pocket and not wearing them on the outside.

In 2013, when the workers realized that without collective struggle the situation would not change, they came together and decided to form their union. They took the signatures of 116 workers and applied for union registration on 6th May 2013 through AITUC. The workers got the registration of the union, "Daikin Air-conditioning Kamgaar Union", on 31 July, 2013. That very night 42 workers were terminated. Among the 39 demands that the workers made in August that year, two of them were the demands to abolish the contract system and make the contract workers permanent, and to implement the facilities of maternity leave and crèche for female workers. The management responded to these demands by terminating more workers and in this process altogether 125 workers were terminated by 8th October. So in October 2013, 846 workers of Daikin plant in Neemrana struck work for 41 days asserting their right to form union and demanding the reinstatement of 125 fellow workers who had been terminated by the management for being part of the process of union formation.

In response, the company management suspended another 56 workers accusing them of involvement in the destruction of company properties during the period of the strike. Despite Management trying all sorts of negotiating tactics during month of November (2013), workers stayed firm and continued the strike. They also mobilized masses from nearby villages who showed solidarity with the workers in a meeting held in November. Daikin workers' struggle stands out, like the Maruti struggle before, in its firm sense of unity between permanent, contract and trainee workers.

Over last three years, the struggle of Daikin workers has continued to evolve. As the condition of contract workers in Daikin and other factories in Neemrana (as elsewhere) is precarious, Daikin union members realised that any realistic chance of involving contract and casual workers in the union would require them to form a union not at the factory level, but across the neighbourhoods. They have thus formed a Neemrana workers union (Neemrana Mazdoor Manch) starting from the May Day earlier this year. The parallel struggle to register the Daikin workers union is still going on in the court.

In these conditions, workers of Daikin (on behalf of Neemrana Mazdoor Manch) decided to participate in the September 2nd strike. This was rather unprecedented in Neemrana where there had been no union, and where participation in a national strike at such a massive level had never been witnessed. The decision to strike was not a decision taken by office bearers and handed down to workers, but was collectively taken by workers after weeks of discussions. Many questions arose, regarding the importance of participating in national strike organized by central trade unions, the risks of suspension involved for permanent workers, and how if at all to involve contract workers and trainees in the strike. The unity that Daikin workers have displayed in their struggle to form a union was clearly on display during the week leading up to the strike. Witnessing some of these discussions it was clear that the majority of the workers had decided that the participating in strike was a must, as it would show the management where the unity of workers stood and how they would not be intimidated. Workers who were concerned with suspensions and adverse action by management were taken into confidence not by intimidation but by conviction. It was also made clear to the workers who were uncertain that if they chose to work, they would not be isolated by the striking workers, thus maintaining the unity. It was decided that contract workers would not be stopped at the factory gate, as it would only mean their persecution at the hands of management. Daikin workers realised that with such heavy contractualization, strikes cannot completely stop the production process, but can certainly affect it and unite the workers in the Neemrana belt. The workers did pamphletering in the days leading up to the strike and gave a call to workers in the entire Neemrana belt to join them. A variety of strategies on how to make the strike effective and how to counter the management's tactics were discussed. For example, if the management had sensed that the strike was going to take place, they would have declared a holiday on September 2nd and made the workers work an extra day sometime in the future. Workers decided to make it clear to the management that if Sep. 2nd was declared a holiday, they would not compensate for it on any other day.

The strike was a resounding success as workers from many other factories participated under the banner of Neemrana Mazdoor Manch. Contract and casual workers who were not on shift also participated. It was a historic strike in the Neemrana belt and a strike not taken by a leadership disconnected from the workers but by workers themselves.

It turns out that the management did take notice and decided to hit back in a vindictive manner in the following week. Virendra, a permanent worker, was dismissed on September 9th for being one of the organizers of the strike. Management alleged that he prevented diploma trainees from joining work on 2nd September and forcefully enforced strike. The management also filed a false FIR against him. But the workers struck work on September 9th and management was forced to reinstate Virendra in the factory!

[1 <http://sanhati.com/excerpted/16078/>]

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