

Lessons from the strikes in India's auto hub

Tuesday 4 December 2018, by [Thozhilalar Koodam](#) (Date first published: 26 November 2018).

The protracted strikes by young workers of Yamaha and Royal Enfield have come to an end after more than 50 days with the workers returning to the factories last week. Their comrades at MSI are continuing the strike even after 75 days with no resolution in sight.

The strikes started independently at different time frames but soon joined hands in various turn of events. The permanent workers of Myoungshin India Ltd (MSI) [were](#) the first group of workers to go on a strike on September 6th demanding recognition of their union and collective wage bargaining. The management had unilaterally proposed wage hikes after the union was formed and had dismissed some of the workers.

The Yamaha strike [started](#) spontaneously when the management dismissed two workers summarily without any due process because they went for a union conciliation meeting, initiated by Labour Department. The workers had intimated the management and had taken leave since management did not give time off for the union activities. Yet the management took a unilateral decision to fire the workers without any enquiry.

The permanent workers in Royal Enfield had initiated an unionisation process and had given strike notice on various collective bargaining demands. The specific trigger for the [strike](#) was the effort by management to shift trainees and probationary workers to the new schemes - FTE and NEEM - instead of making them permanent.

While the strike was confined to permanent workers in Yamaha and MSI, trainees and probationary workers also participated in the Royal Enfield strike. Royal Enfield strike also happened in its two factories, one located in Oragadam and another in Vallam. Both these factories have been operational in the last few years. While the strike was near total in Oragadam factory, the impact was much less in Vallam factory which had more precarious workers.

Demands of the workers

In the case of both Yamaha and Royal Enfield strikes, while the right to unionisation and collective bargaining were at the heart of the struggle, the issues that sparked the strikes were much more specific.

MSI	Royal Enfield	Yamaha
Strike Start Date	September 6 th , 2018	October 24 th
		October 20 th

Reason for strike	No progress on conciliation on workers' demands. Unilateral wage hike announcement.	Management's intention to start internal collaborative forum instead of recognizing the union.	Dismissal of two workers for going to attend a conciliation meeting
	Dismissal and suspension of workers especially union representatives in the factory	Shifting of 3 rd year trainees and probationary workers to FTE and trainees to NEEM. Management's insistence that workers sign 'good conduct' bond. Change in rules to leave the cell phones at gate	
Demands	Recognize the union and discuss collective wage bargaining.	Conciliation to be started. Give permanent employment to trainees and probationary workers	Reinstatement of the two workers without any disciplinary action.
Who were on strike?	Permanent workers	Permanent workers, trainees, workers on probation	Permanent workers
How did it end?	Strike continues as management has offered to increase the wage but would not recognize the union. Management has demanded that the Labour Department give failure notice and the case be moved to labour court	Workers to leave the cell phones in the gate. Workers will sign a statement on getting back to work. Status quo to be maintained in workers who have completed 3 years of training. 52 trainees in 1 st and 2 nd year of their employment will not be taken back.	Termination of the 2 workers to be converted into suspension. Management will not dismiss the workers at the end of domestic enquiry.

In the case of Yamaha workers, it was the summary dismissal of two workers without due process that exposed the power inherent in capitalist production process and its iron control over workers. The workers realized the injustice of the situation, where even an attempt at increasing their collective bargaining capacity was not tolerated by the management.

There was no two ways about this. Their only goal was that their comrades should be taken back because they had done nothing wrong. Their unshakable confidence in their justness of the demand was a major factor in the struggle being firmly grounded through the two month struggle.

The Royal Enfield strike started with the initial demands of union recognition, after giving the initial strike notice period. However, the main issue that forced the workers hands were not just the union recognition and long pending issues of wage increments and bonuses, but that the management was planning to shift workers who had completed 2 years of training into FTE and NEEM categories, thus making these workers in 'permanently precarious' condition. Soon workers in probation and training period also joined especially in Oragadam factory, thus bringing the production to complete halt in that factory.

Thus the struggle demands in both Yamaha and Royal Enfield were different from the usual collective bargaining demands which often take the shape of union recognition and wage negotiation. The usual demands give a lot of scope for management to play evasive tactics as we have witnessed in the past. Recognition of the union is often relegated to endless trilateral discussions in which the management sends low level management representatives with no power to negotiations. The union is forced to play into this process even though it is symbolic in nature.

As the negotiation process is needlessly delayed, the management is often able to bring some of the workers to it's side either through bribery (promotions, better work conditions, money and even other favors) or through coercion, which leads to a break-down of the struggle. Even when the Labour Department is aware of these tactics, the process is accepted, normalised and enforced by the officials due to apathy, self-interest and even corruption (Recently, a raid in Labour Departments during Diwali festivals by Vigilance Departments exposed this aspect of corruption).

In the case of Yamaha, the Labour Department could not itself indulge in its usual evasive tactics as the management had not followed due process in the summary dismissal of workers. In Royal Enfield, the Labour Department had initiated conciliation proceeding advising status quo based on which the workers went back to work. However, it was the management's post-strike actions to make unilateral changes in the production process by asking workers to leave cell phones outside and by asking some good conduct bond that forced the strike to continue. And, the Labour Department had to give an advisory favorable to workers.

Unified struggles both at the leadership and at workers level

It has been the push towards joint action of these disparate struggles that has been one of the cornerstones of the struggles. It has been the tradition of various unions especially CITU to coordinate protests bringing together workers from various factories who would be striking at that point. However, most of the time, these tended to be coordination at the union leadership level with very little intermingling among workers.

This time, the support for Yamaha workers' strike came organically when the Royal Enfield workers sponsored food to the Yamaha workers, even before they themselves had started striking. There was an informal networks of friendship among workers, some of whom had worked previously in Royal Enfield were now working in Yamaha. Hence, as CITU and WPTUC leaders started coordinating struggles and meetings with various representatives to push their cause, there was also exchange of information and solidarity at the worker level.

This worker level alliance is arising out of capitalism's increased thirst for profit making that has created a new breed of workers who, as trainees, are working in multiple factories, and hence have informal connections across multiple factories. While this continues to limit the factory level strikes where production is impacted, it also provides an opportunity for building worker level alliances.

Again the very seed of capitalism seems to have in itself, the seed of destruction. However, for this to be utilised fully, there is a concrete need for unions to consciously build workers coordination

across factories for increased capacity to sustain strikes and succeed.

In the current struggle, this has not been sufficient especially when the state intervention led to resolutions at factory level. At that point, the workers and the unions did deal with the issues individually (at factory level) rather than collectively. This also meant that the MSI struggle has to continue without that same level of support that it had accessed while the struggles were coordinated.

It is important for the unions to think creatively and imaginatively to strengthen these bonds among workers and push for collective resolution of these issues so that their chances of winning these strikes at various factories is strengthened.

Solidarity from other workers and groups

The strikes also saw an unprecedented show of support from various factory level unions, unorganised sector unions and groups. Here are some of the unions that provided resources and solidarity for the workers' struggles.

- Hyundai Motors India Employees Union
- Guindy machine tools
- GE engineering electronics Tamil Nadu Primary Teachers Union
- Enrica Enterprises Union
- India Furniture Company Union
- MRF Workers Union, Thiruvottiyur and Arakkonam
- JK Tyres Union
- Apollo Tyres Union
- Tata Magic Union, TNUEF, Minorities Welfare Committee
- MS Global India Automotive Union
- Kanchipuram District Sanitation Workers Union
- Kansai Nerolac Workers Union
- Sanmina Workers, AICCTU
- Tasmac Workers Union

Specifically, the support of HMIEU union leadership has been phenomenal in the workers struggles. The workers and leaders in HMIEU are those who have continued to stay in the union in spite of various discriminatory policies by the management that has affected them materially and physically. Yet, the union leaders continue to show up for these struggles and have provided material support for the workers throughout these protests. The HMIEU union also protested in front of Hyundai factory gate on behalf of these workers.

This is a significant move especially as MSI is supplier to Hyundai and an expression of workers' opposition to the manufacturer's policy in its supply chain can help the cause of the workers at the supply chains considerably. It's important to highlight the statement by HMIEU Secretary, who had articulated a need for going beyond the financial support.

As he has rightly pointed out, a car is made through the work of workers from two different factories, who draw different levels of valuation(in terms of wage) because of the way production process is setup. It is a deeply political statement that needs to be thought through and strategies need to be built around this.

Similarly, Kansai Nerolac Workers Union from Hosur, visited all the struggle sites which were at different places, expressed their solidarity and contributed financially to the struggles. The

sanitation workers, whose own material lives are in dire condition, chose to express their solidarity by visiting the workers and providing material support. These forms of support go on to show that working class can mobilize funds and other resources to identify with the struggles and support them.

The unions also made moves to build broad-based support for the workers. They met with various political parties and groups, so that these groups could be neutralised, even if they are not vocal in terms of support for the workers. Various party leaders had to at least provide a lip service in support of the workers. Some parties also participated in public protests. The CITU cadres also organised gheraos in front of Yamaha showrooms, effectively shutting the showrooms in some places. These went a long way in bringing the State to resolve the issues.

State's response

The ineffectiveness and apathy of the State has been all the more evident in this case. The Labour Department's advisory, in favour of workers, was not even heeded as the management said that it was not legally bound to follow the mandate of the Labour Department.

This continues to be a challenge as the automobile sector, to which these workers belong, is declared as a public utility service, thereby reducing the legal boundaries of workers to strike. At the same time, the State refuses to ensure that industries comply with even basic legal norms. Rather, the legal norms are being restricted and dismantled in the name of generating employment.

The judiciary, as usual, gave immediate injunctions both in the case of Yamaha and the Royal Enfield strikes, such that workers could not continue their protest in the factories beyond the first few days. The basic judicial ethics demands that the judiciary invite those who are impacted, in this case the unions, for a hearing before giving any such injunction. More often than not, the unions come to know about injunctions only when police come to evict the workers based on the injunction.

This essentially shows that the judiciary continues to see the factory as a private property of the factory management, even when thousands of workers use the space for their livelihood and contribute to its growth. The police too, in the name of law and order, have not only prevented workers from striking outside the factory., They either deny permission or continue to set boundaries in terms of speech, access, time, thus curtailing severely workers rights' to protest. In the Royal Enfield case, the police refused to allow the workers to put a shamiana 100 meters from the factory, thereby denying the workers to express their resistance publicly.

However, the continued resolve of workers, their collective strength by way of organised protests and the support on the ground by various groups meant that the state was forced to broker a deal with the unions. The District Collector had to be involved with other high officials, to bend the will of the managements and allow some sense of justice for workers, which is when both the strikes came to an end.

Challenges

The Royal Enfield strike went as far as to ensure permanent working condition for their trainee comrades, which allowed for the trainees and probationary workers to participate, But overall, the involvement of trainees continues to be low and the issues of contract workers continues to be neglected in these strikes. One of the workers in Yamaha explained, 'when we are unable to ensure that even our (permanent workers') jobs are secure, how do we ask them to take more risks'.

This continues to be true especially as the Royal Enfield management did dismiss 52 workers who participated in the strike. The reasons given was that as many as 100 workers in the trainees

category, were let go even though they had not participated in the strike. However, according to the workers and the union, new workers were being brought in NEEM category.

These contradictions expose the control that managements have on workers' lives and the limitation of legal strategies which can no longer curtail this control. The new schemes such as FTE and NEEM allow management to legally use these workers in core and perennial production and deny them continuity of service and permanency. This takes away one legal tool that helped workers bargain effectively.

No longer do managements need workers to be retained for experience. In Hyundai, the trainees are not retained for more than 3 years and no worker has been made permanent in the recent past. In this, for the left unions which are working towards transforming production relations, not to rethink the mobilizing and legal strategy will be very costly.

So far, the use of contract work has been challenged only during strike which demotivates contract workers who see it as a threat to their job. A review of the forms of work in auto sector and campaign to outlaw contractualization in core and perennial work must be taken up at sectoral level, as unionisation has been achieved to an extent in both OEM and supply chains in auto sector. It would also be important to challenge the state's reluctance to codify the rules on the new amendments to Tamil Nadu Industrial Standing order Act.

The strike as we have said earlier, has been successful due to the coordination and networking among both the union leadership and workers. It's important to institutionalize these networks such that they can be a space for workers to engage not just when strikes go on but also otherwise.

In the Yamaha strike, the unions had encouraged the workers to take more concrete action including being very active in social media. The unions should invest time and effort in developing platforms for such discussions outside the struggle sites. These can be through exchanges of stories of struggles, issues in factories, different forms of actions that resulted concrete results shared by comrades from other factories etc. Workers can be encouraged to bring their friends to develop these networks even during the periods of 'industrial peace'.

Women workers had joined the strike both in Yamaha and Royal Enfield struggles, however women's participation in struggle sites continue to be low. Union leaders and workers site lack of privacy and access to toilets as an impediment for women workers to join the strike. There have been several strikes involving large number of women workers with women spending days at the struggle site. Involving women activists to discuss these issues with women workers and finding mechanisms to solve these issues will go a long way towards increasing the women's participation and involvement in the factories.

Every year, strikes and struggles continue in the Chennai-Kanchipuram-Thiruvalluvar industrial belts as have been documented in mainstream and alternate media. Workers of Jintek, Sanmina, Dongsan, CMR Toyotsu are few such instances where workers went on a protracted strike and still continue to struggle against an intransigent managements. These struggles evolve because the workers instinctively react to the conditions of production where profit is prioritized over people.

Can this resistance against a factory management be used to broaden the consciousness of the workers against the inherent injustice of capitalism? The temporary successes of Yamaha and Royal Enfield show us that this is indeed possible. It is important that these successes are also translated to those countless struggles that die because the workers don't have the strength to carry the burden of the struggle by themselves.

To paraphrase Marx, the role of the unions is not to just lead the workers' protests but to change the character of this resistance into a class struggle for bringing power into the hands of those who toil. When an English daily had titled its article on the end of the strike as 'Stalemate ended', Comrade AK Padmanabhan of CPM had made a rejoinder stating that 'This is not a stalemate. This is a class struggle'. Let us make concrete steps to shape the workers struggle into a class struggle by shaping the workers' ideas and actions both through the struggles and in their everyday life.

Thozhilalar Koodam

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

The Wire - Labour Bulletin

<http://tnlabour.in/automobile-industry/7596>