

## STRIKES AND LABOR UNREST IN THE AUTOMOBILE INDUSTRY IN INDIA: THE CASE OF MARUTI SUZUKI INDIA LIMITED

*Jörg Nowak*

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*The growth of the automobile industry in India was accompanied by a series of strikes and lockouts since the mid-2000s. A peak of this series were the strikes and the uprising at biggest car passenger producer Maruti Suzuki in 2011 and 2012. The article explores the changing forms of organization that the workers of Maruti created during their struggle. Although permanent and contract workers fought together in one of the two factories of Maruti Suzuki, the division between these groups of workers is still a challenge for trade unions and other forms of worker's organizations in the automobile industry.*

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The automobile industry in India has seen widespread labor unrest since the mid-2000s. The series of strikes and lockouts saw a climax in 2011 and 2012 when one out of two factories of the biggest car passenger producer Maruti Suzuki witnessed two wildcat strikes in May and October 2011 and a workers' uprising in July 2012. These conflicts at Maruti had a major significance due to the centrality of the company and the plant affected in the sector: Maruti Suzuki India Limited is the biggest car passenger producer in India, and the Manesar plant is one out of two assembly plants of the company. Plus, the central feature of the conflicts was joint action of permanent and contract workers.

The focus of this text is on the forms of organization that were developed by the Maruti workers. I contend that the workers created a form of organization that resembles social movement unionism and enabled them to form broad alliances. But while this form of organization served the cause of the workers for a certain time period, it comes with crucial limitations, too. Among these limits is the fact that the trade union of the Maruti workers represents exclusively the permanent workers, although the participation of contract workers was decisive for the conflicts in 2011/2012.

### **The Automobile Industry in India**

The Indian automobile industry saw a rapid growth since the early 2000s. The output of cars in India grew from 1.3 million to 4.1 million cars between

2001 and 2012 (OICA 2012), thus India is the world's sixth biggest car passenger and commercial vehicle producer. Maruti Suzuki India Limited (MSIL) had a quasi-monopoly for the production of passenger cars until 1991. The market for passenger cars opened up in the 1990s, with Hyundai being the first foreign company to operate in the Indian market and taking up production in 1998. MSIL dominates the market with a 49 percent market share in 2013, and 44 percent in 2012 (Mohile 2014).

### **Strike and Labor Unrest at Maruti Suzuki**

MSIL started production in 1983 in Gurgaon in the state of Haryana. It started as a state-owned company in a joint venture with the Japanese Suzuki Motor Corporation (SMC). In May 2007, the Indian government sold its shares in the company, and in December 2013 SMC held 56.2 percent of MSIL (Business Standard 2013). MSIL comprises of half of the total unit sales of SMC and contributes 25 percent to sales revenue of SMC (ibid). The factory of MSIL in Gurgaon saw a major conflict in 2000 and 2001 that ended with the forced retirement of a large part of the permanent workforce, and hiring of a huge number of contract workers. Between 2005 and 2006 the Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt saw a series of strikes and labor unrest in motorcycle factories in which contract and permanent workers rose up, but often fought rather separately than together. In February 2007, a few months before the government sold its shares, a second factory was opened in Manesar, 20 km south of Gurgaon in a new industrial area, employing younger workers with lower wages, and a much higher extent of contract labor. This factory became the site of a major conflict in 2011 and 2012.

#### *Struggles in the Gurgaon Factory of Maruti Suzuki in the Early 2000s*

There was constant struggle around the issue of union recognition at the Maruti Suzuki factory in Gurgaon in the 1990s. In 1993, a trade union close to the national federation HMS was formed but not recognized by the management and dissolved.<sup>1</sup> Another union called Maruti Udyog Employees Union (MUEU), supported by the federation AITUC (but not an affiliate of the federation), also had problems to gain recognition in the plant and was actively engaged there from 1995 onwards. Due to the support of the United Front Government suspended trade union leaders of MUEU were reinstated and the union was established in the Gurgaon plant.<sup>2</sup> Responding to changes in productivity bonuses detrimental to workers, this trade union started a tool-down strike of 2 hours each shift in early October 2000 for 9 days, accompanied by a hunger strike (PUDR 2001, 5). In that year, the "production had increased by 400 per cent though employment had increased only by about 65 per cent" (Sen 2011, 193) compared to 1992. This labor intensification was accompanied by a cutback in productivity bonuses, thus the workers were cut off from monetary compensation for a higher workload.

After 9 days of a tool-down strike, heavy police presence was deployed in front of the factory and workers were only let in if they signed a “good conduct undertaking,” stating that workers would not engage in strikes or other similar activities (PUDR 2001, 6; Sen 2011, 198). Out of 4,800 unionized permanent workers, 600 workers signed the undertaking, while the other workers assembled outside of the factory for 2 months (PUDR 2001, 8). The good conduct undertaking was taken back by the company, and the trade union accepted the changes in the productivity bonus. Thus, the resistance did not prove successful despite a widespread and prolonged participation of most of the permanent workforce (PUDR 2001, 15–7; Sen 2011, 192).

The struggle did not end with an agreement, and in September 2001 the company announced a Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS) which was opposed by the union. The struggle lasted until 2005, and finally hundreds of employees, including all the union activists, were forced to accept the VRS. More than 2,000 employees have been gradually replaced by contract workers (Sen 2011, 200). The trade union MUKU, which had been set up already in 2001 by workers who had signed the good conduct undertaking, finally replaced the MUEU union that had led the struggle. MUKU was and is more or less a trade union compliant to the overall strategies of the management.

The attack on the permanent workforce at the first Maruti factory in Gurgaon has been the prelude to later struggles. It established the model that became a blueprint of the categorization of the workforce in this sector: Contract workers stopped being a small minority in the factory, they became a larger group. Thus, the struggle at Maruti in 2000 and 2001 was essential for the establishment of this model and displayed the relationship of forces that was not favorable for the workers.

### *Labor Unrest in the Delhi-Gurgaon Industrial Cluster After 2005*

Gurgaon became the new industrial centre around New Delhi since the 1990s with the Maruti Suzuki factory being the pioneer. It was chosen because of the supposedly calmer ‘industrial climate’ (D’Costa 2005, 125). The industrial model town IMT Manesar 20 km south of Gurgaon started to be developed in the early 2000s as yet another industrial hub, again for similar reasons, the employers evading an emerging organization of workers in Gurgaon.

The labor relations in the factories in Gurgaon increasingly moved to a new model in which permanent workers became a labor aristocracy, representing between a third and half of the workforce. Especially the struggles at the Honda factories in Manesar and Gurgaon have been important in the mid-2000s, because a first strike of permanent and contract workers in 2005 at Honda Motorcycles (HMSI) in Manesar ended with wage hikes for permanent workers only, and contract workers have been attacked for their separate strike in 2006 by the trade union of permanent workers (affiliated with AITUC). The labor unrest at the Honda factory HMSI in Manesar followed a 1-month lockout that included an attack of riot police on several thousand workers during a

demonstration in July 2005, in which 800 workers were badly injured. Another factory in the area saw a wildcat strike in the next year: At Hero Honda motorcycles in Gurgaon in April 2006, 5,500 contract workers started a wildcat strike without trade union involvement and the permanent workers did not participate. In order to avoid a new lockout, the workers occupied the factory for 6 days (GWN 2007). The strike resulted in a wage hike for contract workers.

These conflicts at India's biggest motorcycle producer were followed by a number of disputes including violent killings in the greater Gurgaon area. In September 2008, in Noida, east of New Delhi, the CEO of the Italian autoparts manufacturer Graziano Trasmissioni was killed by workers. The workers at Grazioni went on strike for wage demands, and after 200 got sacked as a response and a security guard fired in the air, the manager was beaten to death (Pratap 2011). During the lockout at the car supplier Rico Auto Ltd. in Gurgaon in September and October 2009 one worker died after clashes with security guards and local mafia. After the conflict, more than 200 labor activists and union leaders were bought out with severance payments, which was a severe blow to the labor movement in the area (GWN 2009; Pratap 2011).

One of the important features of these struggles was the successful separation of the grievances and struggles of permanent and contract workers that was at times facilitated with the help of trade unions for permanent workers. The separation between these two groups was shown mainly by better treatment and shorter shifts of permanent workers, different uniforms, and a considerable wage difference. While contract workers earned between 4,000 and 6,000 Rupees, permanent workers earned between 20,000 and 30,000 Rupees. This division is enforced by the widespread practice of trade unions to organize either permanent or contract workers. This is due to certain interpretations of Indian labor law that "workmen" would not include contract workers, but there is actually no law that prevents the organization of both categories of workers in one union (Sundar 2012, 27). Given that many conflicts in the Indian automobile industry evolve around union recognition, this focus of struggles is likely to enforce the separation among the different groups that make up the workforce.

### *The Struggle in the Manesar Factory in 2011 and 2012*

The struggle in the Manesar factory of MSIL went on for 1 year, from June 2011 to July 2012. It ended with a workers' uprising during which one manager died. In the following, I present the details that are crucial for an understanding of the conflict. The account of the conflict is based on conversations and interviews I conducted between October 2013 and January 2014, as well as newspaper reports, reports of commissions, and reports of political groups. I conducted in total 25 interviews, 11 with workers from Maruti Suzuki out of which nine participated in the strike movements. The remaining 14 interviews were with trade union officials, labor activists, labor lawyers, and academics concerned with the topic.

*The First Strike in June 2011.* The Manesar factory operated with much more contract work than the first factory in Gurgaon. In 2012 at the Gurgaon plant, there were 2,713 apprentices and permanent workers and 2,000 contract workers. In contrast, in the Manesar factory 1,054 were permanent workers, 416 trainees, 225 apprentices, and 2,600 were contract workers (PUDR 2013, 17f). Thus, while in the Gurgaon factory the ratio of permanent workers plus apprentices to contract workers was 1.36, it was 0.65 in the Manesar factory. The permanent workers in the Manesar factory earned around 15,000 Rupees a month, and the contract workers earned between 8,000 and 9,000 Rupees.

The conflict in the Manesar factory started in June 2011 when the trade union founded by employees in Manesar, the Maruti Suzuki Employees Union (MSEU), could not be registered at the Labor Department. The grievances that led to the conflict are described by the workers as such: “Many of the strikes that took place were as a revolt against the brutal working conditions and the work pressure. The wage was below the subsistence and if you look at the inflation and market rates of Gurgaon, it is very expensive area and it becomes very difficult to survive and run family at such low wage.” (MW 9)<sup>3</sup> This description is connected to the wages of permanent workers. The Attendance Allowance was a huge part of the overall wages, so that sick leave or a death in the family could lead to huge wage losses: “For one leave they used to cut Rs. 1800 and for two leaves it goes up to Rs. 3200” (MW 7).<sup>4</sup> Several workers underlined that none of the permanent workers received 15,000 Rupees: “No one got in hand more than Rs. 8000 – 9000. If we used to get late by one second then it was considered as half day and on the other hand there was no extra pay for extra work which was all forcible work of two or four or six or eight hours. When the financial crisis was going on at that time all workers were forced to do overtime. And then they started paying Rs. 10 per hour for overtime. (...) But it was nothing. In one hour the production was of 100 cars” (MW 8).<sup>5</sup>

The MSEU submitted its application to register as a trade union at the Labor Commissioner in Chandigarh on June 3, 2011. The next day, the management pressured workers in the Manesar unit to sign a paper that confirmed their membership in the trade union MUKU that had established itself in the Gurgaon plant. About 10 percent of the workers signed the paper, but most of the other workers started a sit-in strike inside of the factory on the same day that lasted until June 17. The sit-in strike was an adequate instrument to block the production. Strikes held outside of factories are usually undermined by the employment of new contract workers that are at least able to provide for a part of the normal production, while a sit-in strike effectively blocks the production.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the company management hesitates to send the police inside the plant for fear that the high technology might be damaged in the case of police repression. Workers who protest outside of the factory gates are often attacked by police forces or violent groups that are paid by the management. Various sources report that between 2,000 and 3,500 workers participated in the sit-in strike (GWN 2011; PUDR 2013, 23).

On June 9, a demonstration of around 1,500 workers was held outside the factory. It was organized by a joint action committee of the central trade union

federations AITUC, CITU, HMS, and INTUC. The strike was declared illegal by the Haryana government on the next day. An agreement reached on June 17 included the reinstatement of eleven workers who were terminated in the first days of the strike and the assurance that the trade union MSEU can be registered. The trade union representatives of MSEU accepted a “no work, no pay” clause for the 10 days affected and an additional fine equivalent to 10 days of wages.

The wildcat strike at the Manesar factory also had effects on the mother plant of Maruti Suzuki in Gurgaon: For the first time in 11 years, the trade union MUKU held union elections in both plants, while the workers in Manesar boycotted the elections altogether (Sen 2011). In August 2011, the state authorities rejected the registration of MSEU, allegedly because the union had gone on strike before it was recognized by officials (PUDR 2013, 23). Although formally it is the decision of the Labor Commissioner if a union can register, it is widely known that in the state of Haryana a union can only register if the management agrees, although this practice is clearly against the law.<sup>7</sup> During August 2011, the company increasingly complained about a slowdown of production and sabotage.

In this phase, it was surprising for most of the observers that the contract workers joined a struggle that was focused on the recognition of a trade union for the permanent workers. AITUC federation officials advised the MSEU at that time, but the MSEU did not join the federation. Since the workers were not very experienced in trade union struggles, they followed the advice of the officials of the four union federations (AITUC, HMS, CITU, INTUC) that were involved in the solidarity action committee.

*The Lockout.* In the night of August 28–29, 2011 between 300 and 400 riot policemen entered the Manesar factory, and the next morning only those workers were allowed to enter that would sign a “good conduct” bond in which they promised not to take any further strike action or other actions that are defined as “misbehaviour”: “It also prohibited them from singing during work, and ordered them to shave regularly when reporting for work and so on.” (PUDR 2013, 24) This method of a good conduct bond method is not foreseen in Indian labor law, but has widespread use as a tactic of employers in industrial relations in India. It is mostly applied after conflicts in a factory arise in order to restore order. On the first day, only 20 workers signed the bond, and in subsequent days until mid-September, 57 workers were sacked or suspended, some of them office bearers of MSEU (ibid). The workers gathered at the gate every day to show their protest during the whole month of September. On September 1, between 3,000 and 6,000 workers from 35 unions in the area arrived for a solidarity demonstration (ibid; GWN 2011). The company started work with 500 workers and hired 800 new contract workers during the month-long lockout. On September 14, the neighboring factories of Suzuki Powertrain Limited and Suzuki Castings in Manesar as well as Suzuki Motorcycle in Kherki Daula went on strike in solidarity with the Maruti Suzuki workers and also for their own demands—all in all, 4,000 workers were involved (GWN 2011). During all that period, workers

and trade union officials were repeatedly attacked and beaten by paid mafia gangs or arrested by police for short periods.

After negotiations, during which some central trade unions such as AITUC, HMS and the MUKU trade union of the Gurgaon plant acted as mediators, the workers at the Manesar plant finally signed the good conduct bond, and 33 dismissed workers were reinstated. The ambivalent role of the central trade unions becomes relevant in this phase: “There was also pressure from leaders of central trade unions on the Maruti workers to withdraw the strike and arrive at a settlement with the management.” (IMK 2013; PUDR 2013, 24). The same sentiment was also repeated by many of the workers interviewed: they were disappointed by the half-hearted support of the central unions (which concerns mainly HMS, AITUC and CITU). In the early phase of the conflict, the members of MSEU were motivated to affiliate with AITUC and were advised by AITUC officials. But, first MSEU did not join AITUC because the Maruti management did not want to have a “red flag union”<sup>8</sup> (one connected to a communist party) in the plant—later, the MSEU leaders and members preferred to stay independent as they were disappointed by the main union federations:

“None of the trade unions helped us fully. They supported us half heartedly. They just kept assuring us of help but practically did nothing. Actually in this kind of situation the major role is played by the trade unions. Other small groups are not of much importance. (...) Every trade union wanted us to work under them. Their stand was like if we are ready to work under them then and then only they will help us. This was not told directly but they hint us at that.”<sup>9</sup>

“Initially we did not know the character of these big trade unions, like HMS and AITUC. They supported us and we accepted their support. But later on, there were some compromises with the company and they were handled by these unions. Later on we could see the double game of these unions. According to us, trade unions are a bureaucratic system of capitalism (...) We think it is fine to have an independent trade union. The main unions want other trade unions to get affiliated to them. But they are not doing anything significant even for them. So it is better to stay independent.”<sup>10</sup>

The lockout was clearly a response by management to the new atmosphere after the strike in June 2011: the management was not able to restore order, and the workers responded to the dismissals, suspension, and the denial of union registration by acts of sabotage and slowing down the production (IMK 2013). Thus, after the lockout and the acceptance of the good conduct bond, it seemed that workers accepted the rules of the management.

*The Second Strike in October 2011.* But it was the management itself that provoked another round of struggle in the next week. The production should have started again on October 3, 2011, but only permanent workers were allowed to enter the factory. One thousand hundred contract workers were not allowed to enter. The permanent workers gave an ultimatum and after receiving no response, they started another sit-in strike on October 7. Around 15 more

factories in the area joined their strike, with a total of more than 10,000 workers involved. More than ten factories went on sit-in-strike for one day, among them were Satyam Auto, Bajaj Motors, Omax Auto, Lumax DT, HiLex, Lumax, Endurance Technologies, Degania Medical Devices, FCC Rico (GWN 2011). Three other Suzuki factories located in Manesar, close to the Maruti Suzuki plant, remained on strike beyond the assigned day—Suzuki Powertrain, Suzuki Castings, and Suzuki Motorcycles. Suzuki Powertrain produces engines for both the Manesar and the Gurgaon Plant, so the production at the Gurgaon Plant was affected, too, and had to be shut down completely on October 13 (GWN 2011). On October 15, the Haryana High Court ordered the administration to have the workers leave the factory. Around 4,000 policemen entered the Manesar factory and 12,000 of the Central Reserve Police Force were kept on alert (IMK 2013; PUDR 2013). The central trade unions announced a call for a regional general strike if the state were to use any force the day before, but when the police deployed the 4,000 policemen in the plant the central trade unions pressured the workers to leave the company premises and did not call for a strike (PUDR 2013, 25). The workers at the Maruti Suzuki Manesar factory gathered in front of the gate after they left the factory and negotiations between trade unions and management started. One day later, the workers at the other Suzuki plants left the company premises, too, but remained on strike in front of the gates.

After 2 weeks, the strikes in the four Suzuki plants ended effectively on October 21. The company met the main demands of the strike, for example, the acceptance of the 1,100 contract workers. In addition, 64 suspended workers were reinstated and 34 other suspended workers had to resign from their jobs (three of them from Suzuki Powertrain), among them the president of the MSEU who was seen as a moral authority by the workers. He and another union leader were forced to leave the company and threatened to be put in jail if they would not leave and 30 more union leaders resigned somewhat later. Still, the company did not agree to recognize the MSEU (PUDR 2013, 26). That the union leaders left and took money was highlighted by the media and was a severe blow for many of the workers.<sup>11</sup> But, after the second strike in October 2011, the workload was reduced: More workers were employed on the production lines, the company allowed more authorized leaves, and wages of contract workers and apprentices had been raised during the second strike (IMK 2013).

This time, again, the leaders of the MSEU followed the advice of the central trade unions CITU, HMS, and AITUC. The fact that the trade union committee did not keep its promise to respond by striking in the whole area if police were used to evict the workers revealed the half-hearted support in the eyes of many workers. And the fact that their own MSEU leaders left the factory after receiving payments (although under the threat of being jailed) pointed their attention to the potential pitfalls of trade union work.

*The Interim Period and the Uprising in July 2012.* After the second strike and the sell-out of the union leadership, the management promised to get the union registered by the end of the year. Finally, the union was registered on March 1,

2012 under a slightly changed name, the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU) with 12 office bearers.

On April 18, 2012 the union presented its Charter of Demands that included demands for a reduction in the workload, an increase of the authorized days of leave, a restriction of working hours to 8.5 hours including 30 minutes break, wage increases for all workers and an end to the contract system (PUDR 2013, 26). In April/May 2012, 70 workers across all factory departments were dismissed. They were accused of having faked certificates of technical schools, and a number of contract workers were also dismissed in this period for making minor mistakes (GWN 2012). It was quite obvious that these dismissals were intended to get rid of workers identified as “troublemakers.”

In June 2012, the union agreed that the management reduce the annual bonus for 2011 for workers who participated in one of the strikes (GWN 2012). A last round of talks had been held on July 14 and in all talks the management refused to address any of the trade union’s demands. On July 16, the management published a statement that it does not agree to the union’s demands, and the union subsequently distributed this statement among the workers. Eleven of the 12 union office bearers resigned.

The uprising on July 18 started with an argument around 10 a.m. between a worker at the trim line, Jiyalal, and a supervisor, Sangram Kishore. Supervisors usually used to cut into the 7-minute break of workers and this happened also on July 18. The supervisor maintained that he was slapped by the worker and the worker got suspended. At 1 p.m., the Labor Officer and the Labor Inspector were sent to the factory because HR manager Awanish Dev called them due to the ongoing negotiations that now extended to the unresolved labor issues. Around 3 p.m., around 100 policemen from two units arrived in the plant. There are also several reports stating that bouncers in the uniforms of contract workers were present. It is unclear who started the physical attacks, but around 30 workers and more than 50 management personnel were injured during the conflict (PUDR 2013, 26f). As a response to police and management, workers set fire to parts of the offices and the HR manager Awanish Dev died in the flames. There are many open questions raised by the workers: such as why was the fire service of the factory not activated? And why the television cameras in the factory did not record anything?<sup>12</sup> And why did the police not intervene in the conflict?

The official version of the trade union MSWU that was given by Mahavir Diman, a member of the Working Provisional Committee of MSWU established after the imprisonment of most of the union body during August 2012, is that “the July 18 incident (...) was pre-planned by the management to break the union” (Interview on December 7, 2013). Another worker underlines: “There were also some other people in company’s uniform present at that time (at 3 p. m. on July 18). When we asked them who were they? They told us that they were new recruits and when asked about their identity cards they told us that they were new and did not have one. They are still having training. But the fact is that training is provided only in Gurgaon plant. We felt something fishy but we ignored it.”<sup>13</sup>

After being able to register, the officials of MSWU had to prove their capability of being able to lead successful negotiations. Although there had been dismissals related to the supposedly “fake” certificates, the MSWU made a compromise in June 2012 about the non-payment of bonuses, probably to prove its ability to compromise to the management. But this compromising stance did not help the union since the management did not respond to any of the union’s demands. Thus, the efforts of the MSWU ran into the void and this contributed significantly to the uprising on July 18, 2012.

*The Struggle After the Uprising.* The choice to call the events of July 18, 2012 at the Manesar factory a “workers’ uprising” is a political choice. Even among trade union people very different theories circulate on what really happened on that day in the Manesar factory. I will briefly present the various scenarios and ideas discussed but will not go deeper into which one is more likely as I do not consider this as a core question. But the different ideas about what actually happened on July 18, 2012 are important in order to understand the political debate on the Maruti struggle:

1. The police, the judiciary and the management maintain that workers beat up supervisors, destroyed parts of the factory and killed the HR manager Dev, probably engineered and preplanned by Maoist groups that “manipulated” workers.
2. The official position of the MSWU is that bouncers were brought into the factory, threatened the union leaders, started scuffles with workers and that the bouncers killed the manager and destroyed parts of the factory. The event is seen as preplanned by the management in order to break the trade union. An alternative version of this theory is that actually workers got angry but were deliberately provoked by bouncers and the management to engage in acts of violence.
3. A number of trade union leaders claim that it is impossible to say what really happened on that day, but that the course of the criminal investigations is clearly one-sided.
4. Sympathising “workerist” libertarian groups such as Gurgaon Workers News and Faridabad Mazdoor Samachar as well as Sudershan Rao from the Industrial South Asia office emphasise that the events of July 18 were a more or less spontaneous uprising of the workers, even if they were provoked by bouncers and management and that this choice of the workers and the outburst of anger should not be buried under conspiracy theories, even if those conspiracies exist (Interview with Sudhersan Rao; Conversation with Sher Singh) [Correction added on 27 September 2016, after first online publication: the name “Faridabad Mansoor Samachar” was changed to “Faridabad Mazdoor Samachar” in the preceding sentence.].

Calling the events an uprising takes up what I listed here as position number four. This position takes into account similar recent events in which managers

were killed by workers at the auto parts makers Pricol and Graziano (Pratap 2011; Sundar 2012, 27), and the widespread practice of managements in India to provoke violent reactions of workers, often by engaging third persons to exercise violence against workers. In any case, it seems unlikely that more than 50 supervisors and managers were injured by their own bouncers, and the fact that also many workers were injured shows that there was actually a scuffle going on (PUDR 2013, 29). Why and how the HR manager was killed, and by whom, remains unclear and will not be commented on here.

After the uprising in the factory, the police arrested 148 workers, some of whom were not seen in the factory on that day, due to illness or vacation. The factory in Manesar remained closed for one month, and after that 2,346 workers were sacked without any proper justification, 546 permanent workers, and 1,800 contract workers (ICLR 2013). It has been reported by various sources that the central trade unions hesitated to support the Maruti workers after the uprising, at least for some time. At that time, the government started to launch the rumour that ‘Maoists’ connected to the Naxalite movement were behind the uprising in the factory in mainstream papers:

“The government is investigating the possibility that the violence at Maruti’s Manesar factory last Wednesday was part of a larger plot by Maoists to infiltrate trade unions in order to foment disturbances in areas that have heavy concentration of industry, such as the National Capital Region and Mumbai-Pune belt. <There is enough documented information which reveals that trade unions are the new hunting grounds of Maoists. If we get good evidence that there was indeed a Maoist link to the Maruti violence, then we would invoke the anti-terror law,> a senior IB official told ET on condition of anonymity. The official says intelligence agencies suspect the attack on the Maruti plant was ‘premeditated’ and believe that the union leaders could have links to top Maoist leaders. He cautioned it was early to reach any conclusion”(Singh 2012).

The response of H.L. Sachdev of the trade union AITUC, an important player in the solidarity structure of the central trade unions, a few days later, was ambivalent. On the one hand, he suggested that it could have been bouncers paid by the management that set the factory on fire, on the other hand, he suggested to the state institutions to oppress radical groups connected to workers and to enforce a presence of the central trade unions as mediators: “Without investigations, it is not right of the administration to talk of Maoist presence. However, the possibility of involvement of these elements cannot be ruled out. If there is proof of their presence, the government should take appropriate measures. We believe that democratic functioning of trade unions should be allowed in order to root out Maoist influence”(Panikkar 2012).

While the central government ruled out any involvement of armed struggle organizations a month later, it did underline that Maoist organizations supported the struggle of Maruti workers, and Sachdev’s remarks underscore the situation in which the Maruti struggle took place after the uprising. After the uprising the influence of small political groups outside of the central trade unions grew among the MSWU, as they were the only ones that gave support in

that period. It was also the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI), a newer trade union federation that is clearly leftwing but independent from political parties, that became involved in lending its support to the Maruti workers.<sup>14</sup>

As already mentioned, the MSEU was close to AITUC but did not join them. H.L. Sachdev complained in an interview in October 2013 about the influence of “ultra-left NGOs” on the Maruti workers: “So that way, after July 18, after this fire incident where one senior officer was killed the whole movement has not been guided, I am not saying under control, it is an independent union. We don’t need that it should be controlled but in a way it got detached from surrounding trade unions.” (Interview, October 23, 2013). Thus, the struggle after the uprising took place in an entirely new political context given that 148 workers and the whole union body remained in jail until mid-2015.<sup>15</sup> The initial isolation of MSWU after the uprising contributed to a stronger political independence with respect to the central trade unions. MSWU started its own internet blog in late October 2012 and around that time a MSWU Provisional Working Committee was founded as a leadership organ consisting of seven members.

On February 5, 2013, the MSWU called for a national day of protest against the imprisonment of the workers. People participated in 32 cities in 15 states—in Chennai, the protest was mainly organized by Hyundai workers and the police tried to stop the demonstration with violent means but did not succeed to stop it.<sup>16</sup> In late March 2013, members of the trade union went into a hunger strike for 8 days and it ended only after the Chief Minister of Haryana met with them again after a unanimous meeting a month earlier. The repeated meetings with government officials revealed a similar pattern: First, the state representatives refused to meet, then after enormous pressure they agree to a meeting and threaten the workers, and on other occasions they promise to engage for the cause of the workers, but with no outcome. Thus, these meetings function as a way for Maruti workers to show high officials that the struggle continues (MSWU 2013a).

After a meeting of 150 village leaders in Haryana state and 2,000 workers on May 8 in Kaithal (a city in which the workers are jailed) in front of the Deputy Commissioner Complex, the MSWU called for a gherao (encircling) of the residence of the Industry Minister of Haryana for May 19. The police started to arrest protesting workers one day ahead, and attacked the 1,500 protesters close to the minister’s residence. Many people were injured and arrested (MSWU 2013b). In January 2014, a march through villages in Haryana was held from January 15–31 that linked the agitation of Maruti workers to on-going strikes of public employees in Haryana state. These events received visits by many officials from trade unions, as well as intellectuals like Arundhati Roy and leading figures of the Aam Admi Party like Yogendra Yadav (Nowak 2014; Sanhati 2014).

The MSWU showed impressive strength to keep up constant mobilization during the first year after the uprising (only some of the activities could be mentioned here). In 2014, the focus of activity moved back inside the factory walls: MSWU won the union elections on April 4, 2014 in the Manesar factory: The

union won 11 of the 12 seats (MSWU 2014). This result shows that the mass dismissals in August 2012 did not succeed in eradicating the independent trade union from the plant, which is remarkable given the dismissal of more than half of the former permanent and almost all contract workers. It also allows the MSWU to shift back its focus on the activities in the factory—while it was important to not leave the prisoned workers alone, a permanent focus on the defence against the state repression could have isolated the struggle of the MSWU from its connections with other workers in the industrial belt, which is precisely where its potential strength lies.

After the uprising, the officials of MSWU believed that the central trade union officials took a step back and distanced themselves because they believed the workers had used violence and killed a manager. Thus, out of sheer necessity the MSWU developed what can be called a “social movement unionism” approach: It cooperated with a wide variety of actors such as village leaders in Haryana (panchayats), radical student groups, small Maoist parties, intellectuals such as Yogendra Yadav and Arundathi Roy, the New Trade Union Initiative, trade unions of other plants in the Gurgaon region or from other states and unions of agricultural workers in Haryana. The distance to the central trade unions grew, but the cooperation did not stop. At times, leaders of CITU played an important role in the mobilization of people in front of the jail in Kaithal, and officials of other central trade unions held speeches in rallies organized by the MSWU. But it is obvious that the central trade unions were now only one among many other actors involved in the struggle of the MSWU and the Maruti workers.

*The Trade Union and the Organization of the Workers.* Initially, the body of the trade union was elected by a general meeting of workers before June 2011. These representatives made the decisions during the first strike that came about “very sudden.”<sup>17</sup> General body meetings were held regularly in which the union representatives proposed activities “and the worker’s agreement were taken into consideration, but ultimately decisions were passed through the representatives.”<sup>18</sup>

The difference between decision-making of single plant unions and unions from federations is important to highlight here: Plant unions such as the MSWU are potentially tempted to stay focused on their own plant and not take into account other workers in other sectors or factories. Thus, many federations argue that they provide an organizational framework that is going beyond the focus of one plant or sector and embed working class struggles into the wider political concerns.<sup>19</sup> But, in India, it is the traditional and widespread practice of union officials from federations to lead the negotiations of their member unions in plants, thereby establishing a dominance of the federations over the workers in the plants that did not elect the officials of the federations but only the office bearers of their plant union. Thus, there is a negative aspect of this structure that the moderate line of central trade unions in India is at times imposed on employees in plants that want to follow a more confrontational course of action.

Nonetheless, the structure of decision-making in the first phase of the MSEU during the two strikes did not provide for a bottom-up decision-making structure in a broader sense: Concerns and ideas of workers were taken into account, but it was not the general body meeting that made the decisions. To make the decision process more organized, a coordinator represented each part of the factory: “The division was based on the area of work like the workers working in the paint shop, workers working on the assembly line etc.”<sup>20</sup>

And, during the strikes in 2011, the central trade unions AITUC, HMS, and CITU still acted as mediators between the management, the state administration on the one side, and the MSWU on the other side, effectively pressuring the MSEU to sign agreements (IMK 2013). This situation was due to the lack of experience of the MSEU leaders who did not feel experienced enough to negotiate by themselves.

After the union leaders were bought out under pressure in October 2011, the workers took a lesson from that and organized the system of coordinators more closely: They had one or two coordinators at each line or shop, between 100 and 150 in total. Each coordinator represented around 15–30 workers (GWN 2012; KNS 2013; PUDR 2013, 26). Criticism had been voiced that the line coordinators sometimes did not work from the bottom up, but that they disseminated decisions of the union leadership to their units, especially after the conflict in October 2011 (GWN 2012). Only permanent workers could be line coordinators (GWN 2012). Also, after October 2011, the general body meeting of workers gained significance in the decision-making process, probably because of the demands that have been voiced for more control of the trade union after the sellout of the unions leaders (GWN 2012; KNS 2013).

After the uprising in 2012, the sacked workers formed the MSWU Provisional Committee, that consisted of seven members. The MSWU also had different subsections like a legal committee that dealt with the court matters and other specific committees. The former system of line coordinators was replaced by a system of district coordinators, organized around the districts where workers live or come from (KNS 2013).

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the workers’ struggle at Maruti Suzuki in 2011 and 2012 received the greatest national and international attention of any industrial struggle in India in the last 20 years. This widespread attention was due to the centrality of the automobile sector, the weight of the company in the sector, the significance of the Manesar plant both for the company’s productive cycle and for the state of industrial relations in the Gurgaon belt, as well as the persistent action and unity of both permanent and contract workers.

In conclusion, I sum up the aspects that have been at the core of this article: 1. the relationship of MSEU and MSWU to the central trade union federations and the course of development of their modes of organization and 2. the political perspectives emerging from the strike. 1. As I outlined above, the relationship

between the central trade union federations and the unions of the Maruti workers at the Manesar plant is less tight than in 2011 when the struggle started. The interviews with the workers reveal their deep skepticism that traditional unions have anything to offer them. Thus, and because there had been no other allies, the MSWU broadened its scope of action after the uprising in 2012 and diverted from the path of traditional trade unions: They are neither a company union focused on one plant, nor a union integrated into the politics of one of the larger federations. Both options that dominate the trade union scene in India led ultimately to an isolation of workers' struggles from other sections of society.

Although the struggle in 2011 and 2012 involved both contract and permanent workers, the structure of the trade unions MSEU and MSWU replicated the division between both categories, since only the permanent workers could and can become members of this union. This separate organization of contract and permanent workers is often the precondition for ensuring that the trade union is recognized, which proved difficult in the case presented here. In the time period after the uprising, most contract workers lost contact to the MSWU and contract workers that remained in contact with the MSWU did not have a lot of contact with other contract workers either.<sup>21</sup> It will remain a challenge for the MSWU after its reestablishment in the Manesar plant to deal with this division. It also remains to be seen if the new MSWU leadership inside the Manesar plant will be able to play on two levels: to transcend a plant-focused trade union politics and to be able to lead successful negotiations on plant issues.<sup>22</sup>

2. I have already hinted at the political perspectives that emerged from the strike. First, a long term organizational form for the joint organization of contract and permanent workers is a challenge that needs to be resolved. The common struggle of both categories of workers poses the question about common forms of cooperation, either in the form of an official organization or as a clandestine network. The problems concerning union registration are a permanent source of conflict in many enterprises, but this conflict is also designed to displace other conflicts that emerge on the shopfloor to the level of legal struggles on trade union rights, absorbing the financial resources and energy of trade union leaders and workers. The fact that trade union leaders are often either threatened, beaten up, or detained by the police and/or bought off and bribed, underlines the necessity of a network among workers that is at least independent and self-sustainable regarding the trade union organization. The Worker's Solidarity Centre in Gurgaon that was founded in 2013 proves to be a decisive step to establishing a network that is not tightly integrated into trade union work and goes beyond a focus on workers from one company: It successfully linked struggles of workers of different factories in late 2014 and in spring 2016.

Second, it remains a challenge for workers to stage industrial action along the value chain, at least on the national or regional level. Due to the various divisions between at least six or seven significant trade union federations that cover all or most sectors, cooperation across these unions is not likely and issues of organizational competition and top-down leadership traditions in most of these federations will render a successful cooperation along class lines difficult. At the present stage, it is only the fact that large scale conflicts in the sector are

increasingly happening at the same time that increases the pressure on employers. The fact that workers' occupations of factories in the Gurgaon belt at Napino Auto and Electronics and Shivam Pistons in spring 2014 (Business Standard 2014) occurred in ancillary plants that produce not only for Indian companies like Mahindra, Tata and Maruti Suzuki, but also for Renault, Nissan, GM, Toyota and Ford, points to the big challenge for workers' organizations to coordinate parallel strike actions in many plants and across many countries.

**Jörg Nowak** is Visiting Assistant Professor at City University of Hongkong, Department of Asian and International Studies. His research focuses on Labor and Development, Strikes and Social Conflicts, South-South Investment, Althusserian Marxism. Nowak's recent publications include "Class coalitions or struggles within the working class? Social unrest in India and Brazil during the global crisis," in: *Workers of the World* No. 8, "Workers Rights, Universal Claims, and Democracy in the Global South" in *Proceedings: International Colloquium Epistemologies of the South: South-South, South-North and North-South Global Learnings. Vol. 1: Democratizing Democracy*, Coimbra: Centro de Estudos Sociais, 2015, 715-728. Address correspondence to Dr. Jörg Nowak, Weichselstrasse 8, 12043 Berlin, Germany.

## Notes

The field research for this work has been made possible by a post-doctoral fellowship of Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) in the New Passages to India program [Correction added on 27 September 2016, after first online publication: the organization name "Deutscher Akademischer Auslandsdienst" was changed to "Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst" in the preceding sentence.]. I am indebted for help and assistance to Prof. Sharit Bhowmik at Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai and to many of the people embedded in the struggles in the Gurgaon area that shared time, knowledge, tea, conversations and contacts, most of all Marco, Nayan, Sher Singh, Shyambir, Anshita, Asit, Susana, Rakhi Sehgal, Carsten Krinn, and Gerd Dietrich.

1. Interview with AITUC Secretary A.L. Sachdev, October 23, 2013.
2. Interview with AITUC Secretary A.L. Sachdev.
3. Interview with Maruti Worker 9, twenty-six-years old, terminated permanent worker on January 26, 2014.
4. Interview with Maruti Worker 7, terminated permanent worker, on January 25, 2014.
5. Interview with Maruti Worker 8, twenty-nine-years old, terminated permanent worker on January 25, 2014.
6. Interview with Maruti Worker 9, January 26, 2014: "What we do is just sit in the factory and stop the work because if we sit outside company they may bring workers from outside and in that way there would be no use of our strike."
7. Interview with Vikas Barnwal, labor lawyer, October 24, 2013.
8. Interview with A.L. Sachdev.
9. Interview with Maruti Worker 2, December 5, 2013.
10. Interview with Maruti Worker 9, January 26, 2014.
11. Interview with Maruti Worker 1, former contract worker, on October 27, 2013.
12. Interview with Maruti Worker 2, December 5, 2013.
13. Interview with Maruti Worker 2, December 5, 2013.
14. The NTUI is the sixth biggest national trade union federation in India after the five central federations AITUC, CITU, HMS, INTUC, and BMS in terms of membership—it has about one million members.

15. During spring 2015, most of the workers were released after almost 3 years in jail. Up to date (May 2016), 35 workers remain jailed.
16. Interview with Maruti Worker 5, former permanent worker, December 6, 2013.
17. Interview with Maruti Worker 2.
18. Interview with Maruti Worker 2.
19. Interview with A.L. Sachdev.
20. Interview with Maruti Worker 2.
21. Interview with Maruti Worker 1.
22. In September 2015, contract workers at the Manesar factory went on a separate strike since the collective agreement that MSWU had struck with management a few weeks earlier, did not cover any of the issues of contract workers.

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