

19th Day of Strike for Justice: Honda Impasse Continues

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“Hum ladenge... humare mudhom ko puri karthe tak ladai chalu rakhenge... bahooti syada mazdoor saathiya humare saath hei” (We will fight... we shall continue to fight till our demands are met. Very large number of workers are with us). Sitting outside the Honda Motor Cycles and Scooter India Ltd (HMSI), Manesar Plant, Raju, a contract worker of the company told *Labour File*, with a conviction that he shared with hundreds of workers and unions coming forward to support the cause of striking contract workers of the company. *“hum akele nahin hei, hum tekedari mazdoorom ke saath, permanent workers bhi hei. sirf is company ka nahin, alag alag company ka bhi”* (We are not alone, permanent workers from this and many other companies are with us), he adds.

On 22 November 2019, more than five thousand workers marched from IMT Manesar to Mini Secretariat on a call given by the Trade Union Council — a joint council of all trade unions of Gurgaon and Rewari — as a mark of protest and expressing solidarity to the striking HMSI workers. Representatives from all central trade unions, automobile workers unions in and around Haryana and many workers from the industrial belt and individuals from various walks of life showed solidarity and participated in the rally. They have jointly submitted a memorandum to the Deputy Labour Commissioner demanding reinstatement of the retrenched contract workers, lifting the illegal lockout of the IMT Manesar Plant, to resolve amicably the memorandum submitted by the HMSI Employees Union and to conduct an enquiry into illegal contractors and take immediate action against them. Talking to *Labour File*, Suresh Gaur, President of HMSI Employees Union said: “All trade unions have come together in support to our cause. We believe the government will act and the management will listen to us”.

Two thousand five hundred contract workers of the HMSI, Manesar plant are on strike since 5 November 2019, demanding reinstatement of the 600 workers thrown out of the company and to protect the employment of the rest, who are next in the list facing termination. For fourteen days, till 19 November, around 1300 workers were sitting inside the factory, surviving only on the ration meal – milk, two bananas and an apple – supplied inside the factory, while the workers, protesting outside, did not have access to the factory. The striking workers are organised under the banner of HMSI Employees Union affiliated to AITUC (All India Trade Union Congress).

On 19 November, a meeting — with the HMSI management and the union representatives in Chandigarh in the presence of Sri Dushyant Chautala, deputy Chief minister of Haryana and Nitin Yadav, the Haryana labour commissioner — has given a whole twist to the protest. The workers decided to vacate the factory premises and are now sitting outside the factory gate demanding justice. According to the union officials the decision to vacate the premises was because after the meeting on the 19 November they felt the deadlock might be loosened, and the issues would be resolved soon.

Why a Strike...?

Six hundred contract workers of HMSI Manesar plant was retrenched by the management over a period of ten days without citing any reason. The management had also prepared a list of another batch for retrenchment. It was in such a context, the workers decided to fight for their rights. Their demand was reinstatement or compensation at the rate of rupees one lakh for every year of service. A majority of the contract workers have worked with the company for the last ten to twelve years and suddenly they were thrown out of their jobs. "After obtaining ITI (Industrial Training Institute) certificate, we joined this company and believed that the company will never throw us out. Now at the age of 30-35, who else will employ us?", asks Raju

Prior to all these, citing reduced demand and slump in the automobile sector, HMSI management, in December 2018, made 200 workers take leave with the assurance that they will be called back after three months. Instead, the company followed the trend of retrenching the contract workers.

Almost all among the 2500 contract workers are qualified ITI pass outs and they are working for a monthly salary of Rs.14000, whereas a regular employee gets a salary between Rs. 30000 to Rs. 75000. "There is no difference in the nature work with that of the permanent workers, the only difference is in the salary and benefits a permanent employee enjoys", says Suresh Gaur of AITUC and the President of the HMSI Employees Union.

In spite of these gross salary difference, they work since most of them are the sole supporters of their families.

Reasons for Retrenchment and Closure

As is the practice, instead of preparing for negotiation or resolving the issue, the corporate giant came up with the threat of closure of production. On 11 November, the company announced that the production at the Manesar plant has been suspended and that resumption of operations will be decided once the conditions at the plant normalise. With the closure, 1900 of its permanent workforce too has come on to street. They too are with the protesting workforce.

The 'Wings' — recognized the world over as the symbol of Honda two wheelers — came to India as Honda Motorcycle and Scooter India Pvt. Ltd. (HMSI), at Manesar, in the Gurgaon district of Haryana in 1999. Honda, one of the world's largest manufacturer of two wheelers is a 100% subsidiary of Honda Motor Company Ltd., Japan. Regardless of being one of the youngest players of two-wheelers in the Indian market, Honda has become the largest two wheeler manufacturer as well as the second largest two-wheeler company in India producing around 3,000 two-wheelers a day and that too the most popular models such as Dio and Activa scooters and Unicorn motorcycle.

In its CSR report for the year 2018, Mr. Minoru Kato, the President and CEO of HMSI says, "2018 is a very special year for us here at Honda 2 Wheelers. It signifies in many ways the

coming of age of the firm's India operations and its transformation is there for everyone to see. It has been 18 years since we made India and specifically Manesar, Haryana, our home. We have only grown from strength to strength over the years drawing strongly from our global vision and mandate of spreading customer delight". It is interesting to note that, it is in the same year that Honda started the retrenchment of its workforce and now the closure of the plant.

"Workforce reduce karne ka irada hei tho Honda kyom aatvi aur dusvi paas hua noujavan lokomko naye-naye recruit kar raha hei?" (If the intention was to reduce workforce, then why Honda recruited youngsters who are just 8 or 10 Class pass?) asks Kushiram, a solid supporter of the workers and union leader of Maruti Udyog Ltd. According to the workers, many youngsters, without ITI background were newly appointed to work. A permanent worker, who preferred anonymity says, "The work in the company cannot happen without our contract worker colleagues. At the same time, anyone cannot do the job, it can be done only by trained hands like the existing contract workers. They are doing the same job as ours, but are paid pittance and denied any benefits that we enjoy. Isn't this exploitation and cruelty?"

NO COMMENTS...!

"Honda was established upon the fundamental belief in the value of each individual. Based on our philosophy, we respect independent spirit and freedom, equality and mutual trust of human beings who work for or come in contact with our company. As such our management policies focus on developing and enhancing the essential characteristics that every individual possesses - capacity to think, reason, and most importantly - the ability to dream.

Being the largest producer of 2-wheelers and one of the most admired companies in the world, definitely thrills us. But what thrills our associates most is the 'Joy of Creating', one of our missions at Honda, which promotes working for our own happiness.

Source: <https://www.honda2wheelersindia.com/careers#important>

"The fear of unionisation, or expecting a future demand for regularisation, might be a major cause for the management to throw out the workers, says Comrade Amarjeet Kaur, General Secretary of AITUC. According to Amarjeet, it's quite natural that the regular workers become worried with the management's decision to close the Manesar plant. "The workers are showing maturity to stand with each other. In times of hardcore anti-labour policies of the government, the workers unity makes this struggle unique", she says. "There will be more such struggles in the coming days as the codification of laws throw up more challenges for workers", warns Amarjeet

"This initiative of the contract workers should be an eye-opener to the contract workers across the country, who silently bear all the atrocities of the management", says Comrade G. Devarajan, national secretary of Trade Union Coordination Centre (TUCC). "There are millions of contract workers in India who are victims of the contemporary forms of exploitation of the corporates. TUCC gives its full support to the workers of Honda, for unitedly fighting for protecting their rights", he adds

“It is a good initiative taken by the contract workers. Within the context of an unfriendly labour scenario, whether they will succeed or not, one cannot predict. But what we consider as an important role is to get solidarity for the workers as well as to create awareness among workers around, that there is a need to unite and protest against exploitation and fight for their rights”, says Comrade Abhishek, AICCTU state General Secretary. AICCTU is running an office near the company site for attending to the needs of the striking workers

The protesting workers of Honda is getting solidarity and support from workers of the industrial belt. Demanding justice for Honda workers and to do away the contract system, the Automobile Industry Contract Workers Union (AICWU) are with them in full gear. Trade unions of various affiliations have expressed their concern and solidarity to the workers and assured their total support to the struggle

Honda’s Bitter Past

Will the brutal incident of 25 July 2005 in Gurugram, Haryana — the unexpected attack on a peaceful assembly of workers to submit a memorandum airing their grievances — get repeated?

On 25 July 2005, the most shameful day, the Haryana police, defending the interest of the capital, unleashed brutality on hundreds of innocent workers of the HMSI injuring many, and a few fatally. The crime the workers committed, was to protest the management’s anti labour policies. National and international media widely covered and discussed the topic for a few days and later conveniently forgot.

2005: A Post Scenario

Around 200 workers were the only new permanent recruits to the company till date after the 2005 bitter incident. At present the company’s permanent workforce is 1900. The contract workers for the company were all recruited afresh from 2006 onwards leading to a strength of 2500.

(source: Com. Suresh Gaur, President, HMSI Employees Union)

On 5 November 2019, Honda workers were again in the news; this time, it is the contract workers who are protesting against the domineering decision of the management to do away with its contract workforce.

Today is the 19th day of their sit-in protest outside the company gates. Huddled together raising slogans, they sit, braving the pollution and the changing weather with the hope of gathering support for their genuine demands and getting justice.