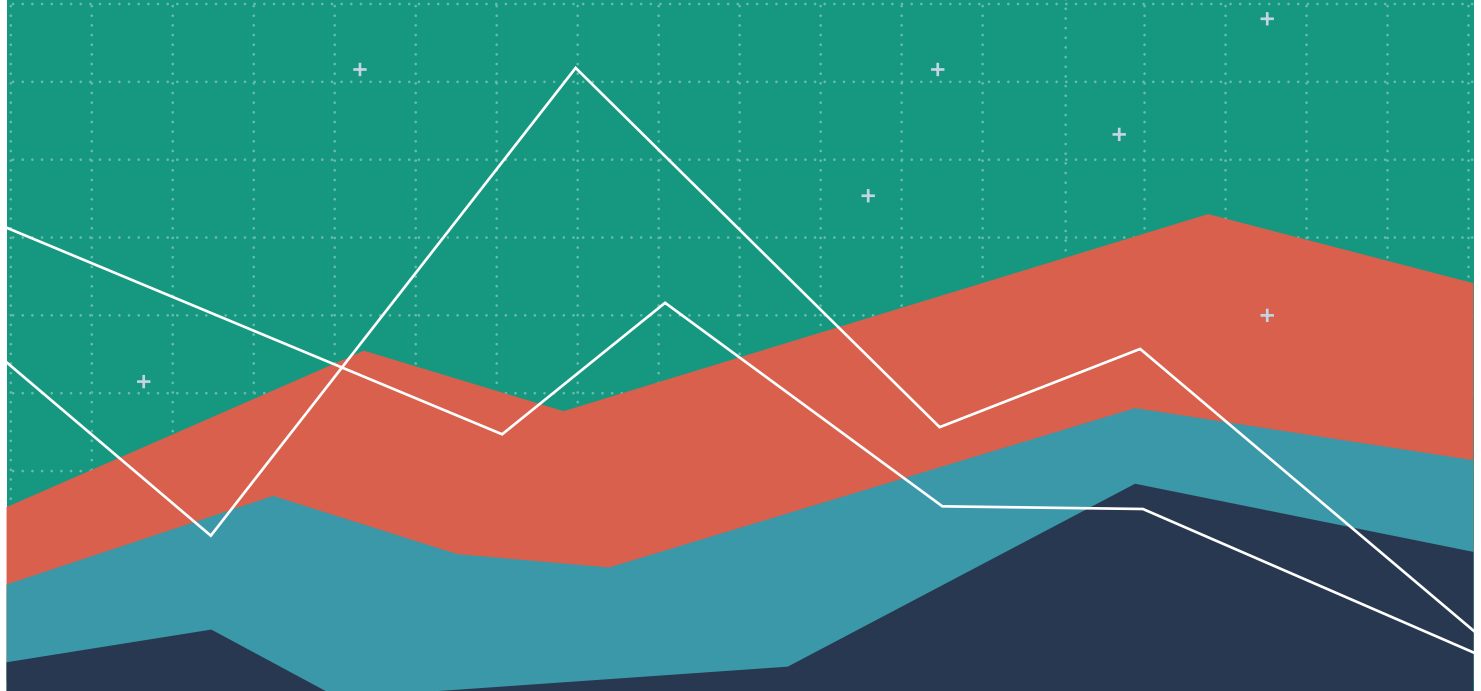


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BACKGROUND PAPER - 18

CHANGES IN PRODUCTION AND LABOUR REGIMES AND CHALLENGES BEFORE COLLECTIVE BARGAINING:

A STUDY FOCUSING ON THE GURGAON-
NEEMRANA INDUSTRIAL BELT IN THE DMIC

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Centre for Sustainable Employment



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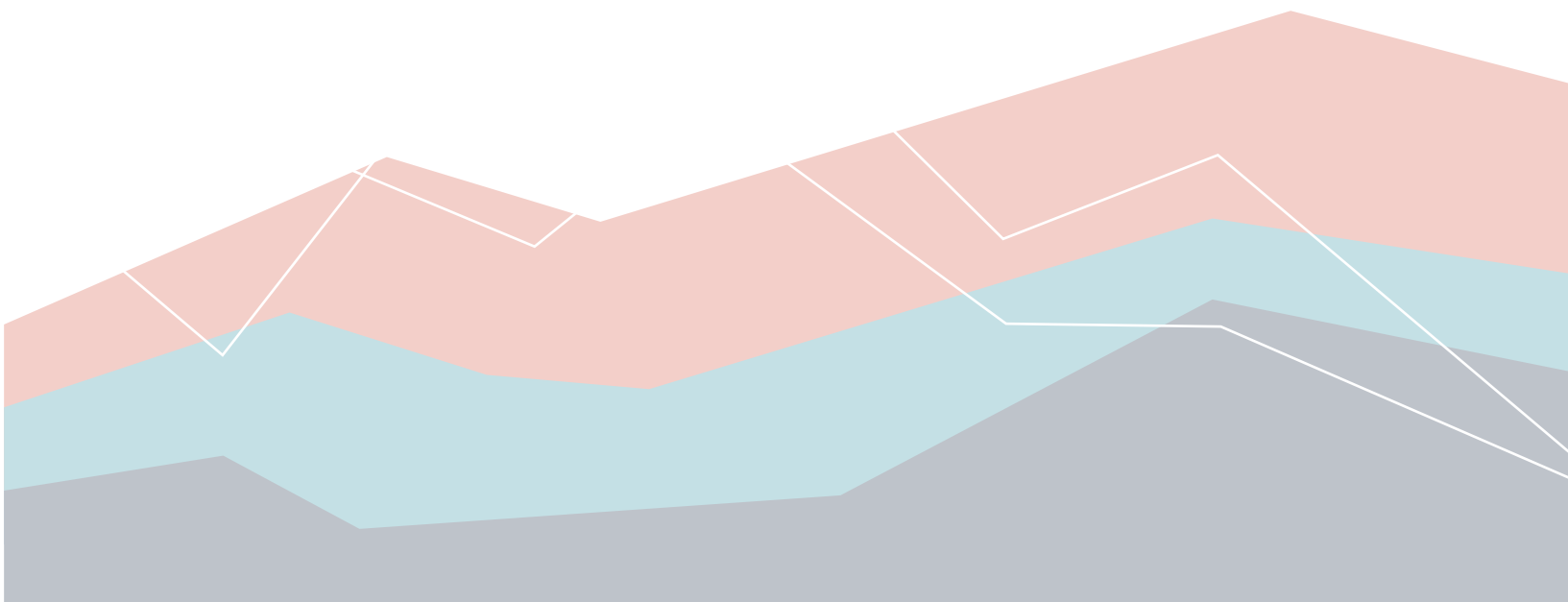
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Changes in Production and Labour Regimes and Challenges before Collective Bargaining: A Study Focusing on the Gurgaon-Neemrana Industrial Belt in the DMIC

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Overview

This study focuses on the Gurgaon-Manesar-Dharuhera-Bawal-Tapukara-Neemrana industrial belt in Haryana and Rajasthan, which is an important 'node' or part of the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC) and a major destination of capital in the last few decades. The study is based on primary qualitative survey work of over 6 months from September 2017 to March 2018. Primary respondents are workers of different segments, plant-level Trade Union leaders and Trade Union activists of the belt, with some inputs from secondary literature, workers magazines and data published by companies and the government.

The attempt to integrate the Indian economy with global production networks (GPNs) in the post-liberalisation period seems partially successful here in this belt, particularly in the capital and technology-intensive automobile sector, the labour-intensive garment sector and the service sector like IT/ITES. But along with industrial growth, this development story has its own underbelly – labour – with job crises, poor working conditions, informalisation of regular work, capital-labour conflicts (sometimes irreconcilable) and dismantling of collective bargaining mechanisms, pro-capital mediating institutions and labour law enforcement processes. For our study, our main focus has been the auto-belt, which incidentally has also been a prominent centre of most militant labour unrests in our country in the last two decades. This study examines the root of industrial conflicts through the transformation of production and labour regimes and the consequent challenges before the collective bargaining mechanism and institutions to explain the worsening employment conditions despite growth.

The automobile clusters in Gurgaon-Manesar and Dharuhera-Bawal in Haryana and across the state border into Neemrana in Rajasthan. They form a contiguous expanding zone of an industrial belt which houses one of the major auto clusters in India. Some parts of the industrial belt are over three decades old, while some are three years old. Their history is rooted in the process of liberalisation of the Indian economy from the 1980s when a significant restructuring in the Indian automobile industry took place in collaboration with Japanese MNCs. In 1983, Maruti Udyog Limited (MUL), a joint venture of the Government of India and Suzuki Motor Corporation, established its plant in Gurgaon and launched the model Maruti 800 which soon captured a large share of the 4-wheeler segment of the market. To promote indigenisation, it had to adopt the Phased Manufacturing Program (PMP), following government policy, which required 92% localisation of components within five years from the start of production. MUL, to reduce its production vulnerability, attempted to develop a strong base of supplier companies and encouraged its local vendors to adopt flexible practices or advanced technology (Bhargava, 2010). This facilitated the establishment of strong supply base of auto components in the Gurgaon-Manesar-Dharuhera industrial belt and later extended to the Bawal industrial area.

Hero Honda, established in 1984 in Dharuhera, as a joint venture between the Hero group and the Japanese Honda company, launched the four-stroke engine motorcycle in 1985, and it gradually became the market leader. It helped the development of auto cluster in Dharuhera. In 1994, the government de-licensed car production. Following on the heels of Maruti, other global players entered the industrial belt. In 1997, a new government policy allowed the companies to localise 50% of production within three years and after that 70% of production within seven years, thus further liberalising the market. In 2000, Honda set up its plant in Manesar. Apart from cars, companies were permitted to export components and ancillaries, and as a policy it further promoted the integration of Indian automobile sector to global production networks of the

industry. In the last one decade, the auto belt has expanded to Tapukara-Khuskhera-Neemrana belt of Alwar district of Rajasthan. All these contributed to a strong regional network of auto assemblers and vendor companies, well connected to global production networks and practices.

In this auto cluster, there is complex web of interactions of lead firms and different tiers of suppliers. In the auto belt, there is a seemingly vertical structure of production networks, where OEMs (Original Equipment Manufacturers) form 'nodes' or 'hubs'. OEMs are assembler plants where no production of components takes place. This is unlike Hindustan Motors, the manufacturer of the iconic Ambassador car, which, under a Fordist model of production, had foundry and forging shops and used to produce 1800 components of Ambassador assembled under one set up. In a 'just-in-time' or 'lean' production model, where there is hardly any inventory in the assembler plants, the first-tier supplier companies supply components continuously in batches. For example, first tier vendor companies like Apollo, MRF, Bridgestone, Ceat, JK Tyre and so on supply tyres to the Maruti Manesar car plant many times a day. Seats come in batches every 30 minutes, whereas some components like fasteners come once in 4-5 days. Some components such as bots for seats and steering, ECU for engine sub-assembly come from Japan too. The OEMs have multiple sources, or first tier supplier companies for each component to reduce uncertainty and promote cost-cutting. Second tier suppliers are those which supply components to first tier suppliers. For example, IJL supplies automotive lighting systems to Maruti Suzuki as a first tier supplier. But it has around 500 vendor companies, which are second tier suppliers, to supply wires, bulbs, plastic body parts, screws, paints, and more than 150 types of chemicals to IJL. NSK Rane supplies steering parts to Maruti Suzuki. But for steering assembly, Mitsubishi supplies motors and Kaparo supplies column components to NSK Rane as second tier suppliers. Third tier suppliers supply components for auto parts production in second tier plants. Thus, the production network has deep backward linkages, extending to informal production in small workshops and home-based production units.

- OEMs in the belt: Maruti Suzuki (Gurgaon, Manesar), Honda 2-wheeler (Manesar, Tapukara), Hero MotoCorp (Gurgaon, Dharuhera, Neemrana)
- Supply Chain: Global players (Bosch, Denso, FCC, Delphi, Continental and so on), Joint ventures of Indian and foreign (mostly Japanese) companies (Krishna Maruti, IJL, Munjal Kiri and so on), Indian Groups (Rico Auto, Amtek Auto, Minda Group, Omax Auto, SPM, Autofit and others), second and third tier MSMEs, informal workshops.

To be more precise, the polarisation or power relations do not seem to exactly reflect the rigid vertical order of OEMs (Original Equipment Manufacturers), 1st tier suppliers, 2nd tier suppliers and 3rd tier suppliers. A kind of de-verticalisation seems to be relevant where a single firm can supply parts to OEMs or to component assemblers. A different kind of polarity seems to be growing. On the one side there are OEMs like Maruti Suzuki, Honda, Hero Honda and so on and global component suppliers like Delphi, Denso, Bosch, Pricol and so on that have links with the lead firms. The labour process, work organisation or technology of these firms are similar, and they have in-house R&D. They are the main players in the production network and benefit from increasing integration with a global market. In the middle there are large enterprises that operate as first or second tier vendors. They benefit from domestic growth of the automobile industry and are important players in regional production networks. Increasing global competition creates a further polarisation in this segment. At the bottom there are large numbers of tiny, small and medium enterprises that have no idea of 'lean production' or 'technological upgrading' and face an immense struggle to survive. And the production network extends further downstream to informal production in slums.

Given this complex production structure, the industrial belt has been a place of many militant workers struggles and has a legacy of a strong trade union movement. But in the last few years an ongoing structural transformation in the production and labour regimes has posed serious challenges to the trade union struggle and the process of collective bargaining. Before we focus on the factors underlying the changes, let us have a brief overview of the history of workers struggles in this belt.

1988-2005: In this period, the struggles were few, mainly plant-based and local, because of limited expansion of the industrial belt. The earlier unions in this belt were in the Hero Honda Dharuhera plant (after the workers struggle of 1988) and in the Maruti Gurgaon plant. The end of the 1990s saw a few militant workers struggles in Dharuhera such as the police firing on Pashupati Sewang struggle, and the formation of the Rico union in Dharuhera. In 1999-2000 the Maruti workers union in Gurgaon plant had a major conflict with the management that led to a three-month strike, termination of 24 worker leaders, collapse of the union, contractualisation of the workforce and Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS) of a section of permanent workers. It created an atmosphere of pessimism for the next half a decade, which was finally broken by the Honda workers successful struggle in Manesar in 2005.

2005-2009: In this period, the struggle for union formation, inspired by the Honda workers struggle, spread in various plants in Gurgaon-Manesar-Dharuhera. Almost 35-40 unions were formed in this period in the auto belt. All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) took a lead role, followed by Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS), in forming new unions. The permanent workers of newly formed unions - through their settlements with the management - could improve their salary, facilities and working condition. That helped the establishment of a plant-level collective bargaining mechanism and raised the general wage structure. The Honda union was the leader in this phase that culminated in the eventful struggle of the Rico Gurgaon workers. Rico workers (and Sunbeam workers) were on strike for 44 days when the management hired goons ('bouncers') that fired at the factory gate and killed a worker, Ajit Yadav. This triggered massive anger in the entire belt. Thousands of workers took out rallies that culminated at the Rico factory gate. More than one lakh workers went on strike for one day. But the plant level leadership could not withstand the pressure from the management and the administration and resigned. The defeat of Rico struggle, despite such workers support, created a wave of frustration that continued till the struggle of Maruti workers in Manesar in 2011.

2011-2015: This period, the most eventful one in this industrial belt, started with the Maruti workers struggle for an independent union in the Manesar plant. That led to three consecutive strikes in 2011. *The militant struggle of workers created new forms, like factory occupation by workers, solidarity strikes, unprecedented unity of permanent and contract workers, ground level self-organisation of plant level workers dissociating from central trade union dictates, and an emergence of a new form of 'working class power' expressed on the shop floor and in the area and a kind of capital-labour conflict that went beyond the legal framework of trade union settlements.* The success of the Maruti workers in forming their union in 2012 created aspirations for others, albeit short-lived. The incident of 18 July 2012, the clash and subsequent police repression stalled the workers movement in this belt for the next one year. But from the end of 2013, a new series of workers struggle in different plants (Autofit, Nerolac, Munjal Kiri, Baxter and others) in Manesar-Dharuhera and particularly Bawal region marked a new phase of successful union formation and settlements, reinstating collective bargaining mechanism and an area-wise struggle and solidarity of workers.

2015-2018: This period marks a setback in workers struggles, triggered by the changed attitude of the capitalist class, the government and the administration towards workers unions and workers struggles, and a set of significant changes in the production and labour regime, and the changes in institutional framework that made the terrain of trade union bargaining and struggle more difficult. This phase is marked by some militant and resilient struggles for union formation ending in defeat after heavy repression by police and non-negotiable attitude by companies and institutions towards struggling workers (Shriram Piston workers struggle in Bhiwadi, Honda workers struggle in Tapukara, Aisin workers struggle in Rohtak, Minda workers in Bawal, and more). This phase is also marked by the attempt to crush established unions in several factories by repression or by shifting the production base itself as seen in Ahresty in Bawal, Omax-Automax-Rico in Dharuhera and others.

Our focus is on the last period. *Here we are interested in exploring the challenges before collective bargaining mechanisms due to structural changes in production and labour process and changes at the level of policy and institutions. We propose a few major tendencies behind these changes:*

- The increased mobility of capital and setting up multiple units of the same company in the industrial belt and the easy shifting of production from older to newer units (with more flexible labour regimes), and even closure of old units, have reduced workers control over production, effectiveness of strikes and bargaining capacity of unions in the older units. It has reduced associational bargaining power of workers.
- New technology has made workers more disposable and has given management more control over production. Mechanisation and automation have made skill and experience increasingly redundant and have threatened job security. Intensification of work demands a young docile workforce instead of older experienced people. Continuous industrial restructuring has reduced structural bargaining power of workers.
- Crises of agriculture, jobless growth and India's demographic dividend has created a large pool of unemployed youth waiting outside the factory gate, and ready to work even under worsening working conditions.
- Infomalisation of work in a formal sector like automobiles has shifted the burden of production from permanent to various categories of temporary workers. Permanent workers have become a minority. Their union thus has less control over production. The new categories of workers like Diploma trainees, Student trainees, Diploma Apprentices are not even recognised as 'workers' and thus they have minimal connection with the union process.
- The increasing connectivity inside production processes under 'just-in-time' and 'lean' production and the competitiveness in the auto sector cannot tolerate any form of workers subjectivity that influences the production process and creates uncertainty. It has resulted in projecting union process and 'collective bargaining' of workers as an 'act of indiscipline'. Thus the 'labour dispute' is now seen as a 'law and order' problem. It has led to criminalisation of labour struggles and repression, in place of reconciliation and mediation mechanisms.
- The BJP government in Haryana, Rajasthan and in the centre after 2014 and its pro-corporate policies have had an impact too. The gradual dismantling of labour protections, pro-corporate changes in labour law and weakening of institutions such as labour department, labour court, tribunals, have led to a weakening of the framework of collective bargaining.

1. The Changes in Production Structures

1.1 / Changes in Labour Process, New Technology and Increasing Disposability of Workers

Companies have shown different strategies to undermine the collective assertion of labour. One way is to crush the workers' movement and damage the confidence of workers and then restructure work, technology and production processes without any significant resistance, so that the previous objectivity of workers struggle gets changed and undermined. After the three-month long workers' strike of 2000, the Maruti Suzuki management could crush the resistance and terminate the main leadership. They then introduced a VRS scheme to reduce the workforce, increased the number of contract workers to undermine the strength of permanent workers, restructured production where contract workers would run the main work, and co-opted a section of workers and formed a separate union. But often capital is forced to make a compromise with labour to avoid larger damage. Thus, the struggles of Hero Honda workers in late 1980s, Honda workers in 2005 or Maruti Suzuki workers in Manesar in 2011-12 could achieve their right to form unions. In such scenarios, capital has to concede to labour. But, in gradual course, in Hero Honda, and partially in Honda, the management was successful in containing the union representing the interest of only permanent workers. These workers gain from increased productivity, whereas the main burden of production was on contract workers.

In this section we study the production and labour process of two of the most advanced and leading auto assembly plants of Maruti Suzuki, Manesar, and Honda, Tapukara, which were also centres of two of the most militant plant-based workers struggles in the past decade.

- The intensification of work, the worsening working condition, excessive control of management over labour processes and dehumanisation in terms of being an appendage to machines triggered unrest among workers. 'Union formation' was not the end but the means to alter this working condition. A shared struggle brought permanent and contract workers together. Thus, the root of the struggle was over the conditions of work on shop floor. With their union, they could bargain better for that.
- The workers were aware of their capacity to affect the production at the nodes and thus the capacity to disrupt the entire supply chain production. This gave them a 'structural power' because of their locational advantage.
- The workers were also aware of the fact that the company earned huge profit because of the hard labour of the workers, but their share of that was abysmal. Without a union, it was hard to bargain for their share.
- This dynamic contradiction of labour-capital determined much of the changes in production and the labour regime, and the fate of collective bargaining.

CASE 1: Maruti Suzuki Manesar Plant

Maruti Manesar has three plants – A, B, C. During the strike of June 2011, only plant A was in existence. Plant B started in August 2011, and plant C started in end-2012. Since then Maruti's production has tripled. 480 cars are produced in each plant, in each shift. In the last two and a half years, a flexi-line, which is operated manually, has been installed in plant A with a capacity to produce 250 cars/shift for emergency purposes. Among a total workforce of 7000, only 1700 are permanent workers. All the others are hired as temporary workers (TW), contract workers, apprentices, student trainees who work along with permanent workers in the same nature of production work in the press shop, weld shop, paint shop, bumper shop, injection moulding and assembly lines. A new worker needs seven days training on basic production processes, safety, 5S and so on, and is then sent to the line where a permanent worker or old TW takes charge of 21 days of production line training.

- **Production and Labour Processes:**

The production process in the assembly plant starts from the press shop, where the sheet metal is cut or pressed, generally a day before assembly. The Manesar plant has several lines of power presses. They are automated, and the press tools of these machines change without human intervention, according to different types of parts to be pressed. The press shop runs on three shifts. The hard work, such as taking out pressed parts from the machines, is done by temporary/contract workers and apprentices. In general, the press-shop work is less hard, as most work-stations here are machine stations, and the workers have a little breathing space while the machine works. The workers in the weld shop and assembly line have a harder time. In the weld shop in the Manesar A-plant, there are 250 to 300 hand welders. Plants B and C are fully automated. The number of work stations has reduced from 16 to eight since 2006 and further reduced to 4 – with automation and robots - since 2011. Although the number of work stations reduced, work got re-distributed in such a way that employee numbers did not get reduced. This is because jobs were redesigned - one robot substitutes three to ten workers, depending on the nature of job. In the paint shop robots rub shoulders with humans. But that does not reduce workload as temporary workers need to carry 70-80 screens back and forth.

There are many work stations on the long block assembly-line, attended by one worker each. Each worker has several operations for a car within a 60-second cycle. For example, the engine block arrives and then it is washed. A single worker uses a crane, then clamps the engine block, after that operates the washing machine, and lastly takes the engine out. The worker is forced to multi-task but hardly acquires a 'skill'. Thereafter another worker fits the crank shafts which are also checked, then washed, and then fitted manually. This fitting is physically one of the most demanding tasks as the crank shaft's weight is 15 to 20 kilograms.

In a developing country like India, the availability of cheap labour determines the work organisation to a great extent. In work where standardisation or quality of products is not that important, we see much less mechanisation take place, however brutal the work may be.

- **New Technology, Skill and Disposability of Workers**

The plants have been mechanised and automated over time and today, more than a thousand robots work alongside humans. New plants, B and C, have much more automation, with fully automated weld shops and paint shops. Even many manual operations in plant A have been

replaced by machines in the last few years. Advanced fuel filling in assembly, earlier done by workers, has been replaced by machines. Tire shifting in Final-2 line in assembly is now done by robots. Wind shield sub-assembly is now done by robots. In plant A we still see a number of permanent workers due to the manual nature of work there. In the assembly line of plant B, the ratio of permanent workers to temporary workers is 1:4. In plant C, the ratio is tilted more towards temporary workers. Plants B and C have fewer work stations too. The work is distributed between final-1 and final-2 lines and there is no final-3 line in these two plants.

Permanent workers are required particularly for those kinds of operations which based on skill and experience, and which are crucial to the entire production process, for example:

- 'Maru-A' – work that carries a risk of an accident and thus is threatening for car/life, are categorised under 'Maru-A' stations. These are important work stations where experienced/permanent workers should be working. These are done under strict inspection.
- In the chassis section – axle fitting, engine fitting, fuel pipe fitting.
- In the final assembly – all work related to steering, break setting, parking lever setting, head light setting (coupler connection) and so on.

There is increasing automation in these operations to reduce the dependence on the skill/experience of workers.

Some operations such as final-1, final-2, final-3 sub assembly lines are crucial for production and the role of workers is important in these stages. In the trim section, chassis section and final-1 and final-2 lines, there shouldn't be more than 20-25 short interval stoppages, per shift, to ensure no production loss. For final-3 and vehicle inspection, not more than 5-10 such stoppages are affordable. Otherwise daily production may come down below 480 cars a day. When a defect is spotted in the car, the worker may show either a yellow signal or red signal in the display board. A yellow signal calls for the immediate attendance of supervisor/reliever to correct the defect while the production line moves. If the defect is not corrected within two cycles (120 seconds), the line stops. In case of a red signal, the line stops immediately. In the assembly line, skill and experience were needed to manage parts for different models of cars. In the last four years, new technology in the form of VTS system and 'Pika Pika' system has smoothed this problem and has made skill and experience more redundant. Every car has a set of data associated with it, and parts are fitted to it accordingly. The car model should be specified, for example, Swift or Ertiga or Baleno. It may be a petrol or diesel variant. It may be a model variant, for example, long variant (LXI) or high variant (ZXI, with advanced technology). It has a PSN number (production serial number, in the range of 1-10000) for specific identification. As soon as the car joins the assembly line all the data for a car comes from the paint shop to assemble via VTS system. The 'Pika Pika' system has a blinking notification when a container of appropriate parts reaches a worker. For example, if it is Swift Dzire, then the appropriate Dzire part container blinks, and the workers picks up the appropriate part to fit to the car. Thus, even the new workers can run the production without making many mistakes.

• The Capital-Labour Conflict and Consequent Restructuring of Production and Labour Process (2011-18)

Any disturbance in the automobile production network has a ripple effect along the supply chain, as was seen during the strikes of 2011-12. The management is well aware that the workers here enjoy a particular nature of structural power. If we study the events that unfolded after the struggle in Maruti Suzuki in 2011, we see that the management was forced to increase the tea-break from seven and a half minutes to 15 minutes, to decrease the speed of assembly line, to increase transport facilities for workers and employ more workers. The contract workers could take two holidays in three months. Before the dispute they were allowed only one holiday which also had to be approved by the supervisor. The permanent workers could take four holidays in three months. But all this implies that for capital to maintain its profit margin, it has to transfer the crisis elsewhere, and one option is across the value chain. As part of this cost-cutting exercise, the company initiated measures to step up localisation levels and to pare the number of tier-I suppliers over the next two-three years. The company expected to save up to Rs 2,000 crore a year. To secure the supply side, Maruti Suzuki has made a deal with FIAT to obtain 100,000 engines per year and also decided on a merger with Powertrain to ensure the supply of diesel engines. Maruti adopted 40 ITI colleges in Gujarat, to ease the supply of labour. By outsourcing work to companies such as Belsonica, FMI, Krishna Maruti, SKH Metal which operates on the Maruti premises, a formal division is created between workers in the same factory. Thus, we see that the unrest pushed the management towards industrial restructuring.

In the period of 2012-14, when there was no union active inside the plant, many coercive changes took place. A system of taking 'company casuals' for seven months instead of contract workers started, as the 'company casuals' being on the payroll could be monitored better. After seven months, these casual workers were discharged, and the next batch was taken in for another seven months. While regular workers are kept under constant pressure, the reserve army of discharged workers is called back to run the production work in case the permanent staff went on strike. The management effectively stopped taking regular workers. Earlier there were relievers in each line, to help run the process of production in case someone was absent from the line or from duty. Now there were no relievers. Earlier, in the vehicle inspection (V.I.) department for road tests there were 16-17 workers in plant A; now, the same amount of work was managed by eight workers only. In the trim line, there were 125-130 workers; now there were 70-80 workers. Also, in the Final-1 assembly line there were four areas, each headed by a supervisor; now there were three areas for the same work with three supervisors, few workstations and fewer workers.

The Maruti Suzuki Workers Union was set up in 2014 and in 2015, the salary of the permanent workers increased substantially. The working conditions changed in favour of workers due to increased collective bargaining power of workers in the plant. Also, the formation of 'Maruti Suzuki Mazdoor Sangh', a federation of four unions of Maruti group (Maruti Gurgaon, Maruti Manesar, Maruti Suzuki Powertrain, Suzuki Motorcycle) and two unions of Belsonica and FMI (vendor companies at Maruti Suzuki Manesar plant premises) increased the bargaining capacity of workers. Assembly line speed decreased due to bargaining from unions and cycle time per car got increased to 60 seconds in the Manesar plant (before 2011 it was 48 seconds). Per shift car production came down to 480 (from 550 in 2011). One reliever per 8-10 workers is the norm now, giving workers time to go to the toilet, drink water and take short breaks. Other facilities including incentives, housing plans, home loans, car loan and so on were provided to permanent workers.

In the process of reducing the conflict with permanent workers in the plant, the management made sure that the substantial disruptive capacity of workers at Maruti - the node of the

production network - got mitigated too. There were four types of responses from the management. First, an understanding was made with the union to maintain peace and reduce uncertainty, while further mechanisation was undertaken. This reduced the control of workers over the production process and made skill and experience more redundant and therefore workers more disposable. Second, apart from absorbing the militancy of permanent workers, the workload was transferred to temporary workers of various categories, deepening internal segmentation of workers and informalisation of work. Third, new technologies to control the supply chain helped Maruti centralise the flow of materials and components and transfer any crisis down the supply chain. The vendor companies were further 'disciplined' to meet Maruti's needs and were heavily penalised for any deviation. The vendor companies, with reduced bargaining power vis-à-vis the assembler plant, now became more intolerant of workers' unions in their own plants. Fourth, preparations were made to gradually shift production to newer plants with higher automation and a more flexible labour force. In the newly established Gujarat plant of Maruti Suzuki, the temporary workers (TW) get a salary of Rs. 8000-10000, compared to Rs. 15000-16000 received by TWs in the Manesar plant. Even today, there are no trainee/permanent workers and temporary workers run the entire production. Workers are not allowed to take their mobile phones inside. Increased mechanisation has ensured less stoppage time and high productivity and intensification of work. This new production regime threatens the workers' rights achieved through the protracted struggle in Manesar.

CASE 2: Honda Tapukara Plant

Honda is the world's largest manufacturer of two wheelers. It has a 26% share in the domestic two-wheeler market. It has four plants in India, in Manesar (Haryana), Tapukara (Rajasthan), Narsapur, Bengaluru (Karnataka) and Vithalapur (Gujarat). Established in April 2011, the Tapukara plant in Alwar Rajasthan is the second plant of Honda Motorcycles and Scooters India Ltd. (HMSI). The production capacity in its two plants in Manesar and Tapukara rose 30% to 2.8 million units per year in FY 2012-13. They registered surplus profits as real wages dropped or stagnated. The Tapukara factory produces 5000 two wheelers per day in two assembly lines. They produce five models including Activa, Shine, Dio and Aviator.

• Factory Conditions and Labour Process

(We interviewed many Honda workers who were part of the struggle of union formation in 2016, and who were terminated from their jobs thereafter. New Honda workers currently working inside were mostly non-responsive. Hence the description of production and labour process refers to the time period January-February 2016.)

The number of permanent workers in HMSI was 466, Trainee and Company Casuals were 100, and there were around 3000 workers on contract. All the workers had an ITI degree. Most workers were in the age group of 23-28 years and were migrants from different districts of Rajasthan and Haryana. There was no accommodation provided by the company, so the workers had to stay in private accommodation in Tapukara, Khushkhera, Bhiwadi, Dharuhera, on both sides of Rajasthan-Haryana border.

The management claimed that the process from contract and company casual to becoming permanent is seamless. However, it could take eight years, if at all, **making more than 3/4th of the workers 'almost permanent'**. These workers' contracts include work of a perennial nature on its two assembly lines, making them sham contracts. They do similar work in the production process

as the permanent workers and 'could' sit for a test after three years of their contract. Very few of them passed the test and fewer passed the interview after that. Those who passed both had to work as 'Company Casual' for two years. If their work was satisfactory, then they might be taken as 'Trainee' for another three years and thereafter they might be made permanent. Till 2016, less than 100 workers were made 'Company Casuals' in this process, and no one was made permanent through this long process. Workers hired as permanent also had to be in the 'training period' with meagre monthly stipends for three years and then under 'probation period' for another six months. In reality, the workers had no formal training and are directly sent to the shop floor, where they acquired the required skill in 10-15 days or in a month, depending on the nature of work.

The Tapukara HMSI plant operates four shifts: Shift A runs from 6am to 2.30pm, Shift B1 from 2.30-11pm, Shift B2 from 3.20pm-12pm, and Shift C from 11pm-6am (where only the Machine Shop is open). The main production shifts are A, B1 and B2. The lunch break of 30 minutes and two tea breaks of 10 minutes each are not included in the work time.

To produce 5000 two-wheelers per day, the factory operates through a schizophrenic combination of accelerated time through 'lean production' techniques, robotic technology and brute, monotonous physical labour. Though segmented through wage division, both regular and contract workers are under immense work pressure and feel insecure. One example of the work pressure is the Engine Line where 337 workers (in two lines in two shifts) have a takt time of 17 seconds. That is, an engine is assembled every 17 seconds, with each second counting as profit on the balance sheets. The Frame Line with around 600 workers has a takt time of 19 seconds, while the Vehicle Quality with 200 workers has a takt time of 17 seconds.

In the production process, the main shops are – HPDC (High Pressure Die Casting), press shop, weld shop, paint shop, machine shop, engine assembly and frame assembly. In HPDC, aluminium ingots are molten and cast to make crank cases and cylinder blocks, and then sent for machining. Most of the work was done by robots and contract workers. In the beginning of 2016, there were around 140 workers in HPDC, including around 90 contract workers. 80-90 vendor company contract workers (from SIS) also worked with them. There were 11 die casting machines. The processes are automated and even a new contract worker - after basic training and safety training - was sent directly to the machines to work. It took around 10-12 days to pick up the skill to work properly. Two workers were supposed to work in a machine in a shift. But only one worker was made to work in a machine for eight continuous hours of high-fatigue work. The job included the manual handling of hot metal of 10 kilograms with a tong and breaking of surplus material ("runner") physically. There was no provision for a 'reliever'. If someone had to drink water or go to the toilet, other workers had to adjust the work. After eight hours, the contract workers were regularly forced to work over time.

In the press shop, the sheets came from Jindal Steel (and some particular sheets come from Japan). Die for the press came from both Japan and India. For serious problems, the die used to be sent back to Japan for repairing. A 500 to 800-ton big die used to fall on a smaller die to give the required shape of the material beneath the smaller die. Sensors were attached to the die to prevent fatal accidents. Loading and unloading of 15-20 kg materials was heavy manual work. Also, the continuous sound created by the repeated falling of die made the work environment strenuous. Mostly contract workers were in production in press shop. The quality section of the press shop had mostly permanent workers. The machine shop was fully robotised. For surfacing, hole checking and other works, workers placed parts, set robots and placed finished parts in the trolley again.

In the welding section, centre welding is done by OB welding robots. Of a total of 250-300 workers, around 50 workers were permanent. A line had an average of 30-35 workers. There were four OB robots each in two OB welding lines, three fuel filler robots each in three lines and two robots in the fender line. After the OB welding was done, there were 26 stations to attach parts by spot welding and seam welding, set fuel filler, check for dent, cut, leakage and so on. There were several stations which had critical operations, manned by permanent workers: OB stations, outer quality, seam welding, fuel cock welding, tank quality check and most importantly, leakage testing. There were initially two lines of fuel tank production, each with a capacity of 550 per shift. The workers resisted because of intense work pressure, and after production slowed down several times, another line for the fuel tank was added in May 2012. The total production from these three lines was set at 1100 ultimately. Additionally, in the fuel tank line two extra stations were added after workers put pressure. The third line of fuel tank was technologically superior, with Japanese machines, and was less dependent on experienced workers. Japanese seam welding reduced unwanted 'bur' alongside cuts and ensured less leakage. The cycle time also gradually reduced from 43 seconds. The workers had to do the welding for hand screen and frame welding manually. The heavy manual work with inclined posture caused back pain at the finishing station. During manual spot welding, the workers developed 'spatters' on their hands. Workers had to lift 20-22 kg frames for 'jig inspection'. Accidents, demands for new gloves and other safety equipment, timing for bathrooms, time off and forced over time, often caused disputes. Yet, since a significant part of work is manual in the welding section, the workers had the capacity to control production to a significant extent.

There were around 30 stations *in the sub-assembly* where parts were set on the conveyor, rings were set to pistons, 'L-cover' of 'L-R combination' was set and number punching was done. Here we elaborate the working process of an important station, for example, number punching. It was a critical station, because in the case of missing a number or change of a series number, the impact would be drastic. 1100 punching impressions used to be done in eight hours with a 'mini robot'. The sound made by the punching machine was bad for hearing and the work used to put a lot of pressure on the eyes too. The conveyor cycle time was 17 seconds for a part and in that time period several operations had to be done – L-cover lifting from the trolley, then checking of the hole, marking the thread, checking surface of the L-cover, then putting two bearings, then putting on the machine under the mini robot, then pressing two buttons simultaneously, then following the computerised number punching process, and finally sending the part for the next stage. All this had to be done in 17 seconds, repeatedly and without a break for eight hours. On this station no new or casual worker was allowed. If the needle broke, then it led to stoppage of production, and sometimes a Japanese technician had to come to set it.

In the main assembly, there were around 40 stations to check L-cover, match card number, set the L-R combination together, liquid treatment and so on. There are some critical stations where skilled and experienced workers are needed, such as:

- Torqueing – If the torque was not done properly, the assembly line would stop. In 17 seconds, a worker had to place eight bolts and tighten them, torque according to fixed Newton metre standards, add grease/oil and finally pass it further. Setting a piston in the cylinder block needed skilled workers too. If the work had faults, the piston rings might be damaged. The Piston assembly with a crank was another important station. If this work was not done properly, then it could lead to the damage of the bike. All these stations needed permanent workers. In the main engine assembly line, apart from crucial stations, all other workers were contract workers.

- There were a few accident-prone stations. One was where the pulley was to be set to the 'L-R combination' of the engine, the highest torque being 110 (by the Newton metre). Workers often injured or cut their fingers here. These workers always were contract workers and the company could sweep the accidents under the carpet. Eventually the manual torque was replaced by machines.

Initially, in every minute, the line used to stop once each for three engines, leading to high interruptions of 40-50 minutes per eight-hour shift. The cycle time was also 22 seconds. Gradually the workers acquired experience and the production process was mechanised and automated. Although that reduced both 'breakage time' and 'cycle time' (17 seconds), it led to intensification of work.

1.2 / Increasing mobility and bargaining power of capital vis-à-vis labour: threats of shifting of production, closure and lay-off

In last few years in this industrial belt, a definite tendency of deindustrialisation - embedded very much in the process of industrialisation itself and facilitated by the changes in production and labour regimes and increased mobility of capital - has threatened the existence of old and established unions, mitigated the effect of strikes and undermined the bargaining power of workers and collective bargaining mechanism at the plant level.

In the last decade the general tendency of the companies in the auto belt has been to set up multiple production units to split up the production among different units, to shift production gradually from older units (where the workers struggle led to union formation, salary hike, increased facilities and job security) to newer units (with no unions, mostly contractual and informal workforce, less salary, facilities and job security, and greater applicability of new technology and mechanisation/automation and higher productivity). Market dynamics necessitate that the automobile industry increases in production capacity, technological and product innovation. Vendor companies too need to follow suit. But it is not just that. In the context of ongoing capital-labour conflicts, splitting up of production among different units and distributing production became an effective tool for the companies to cut the plant level workers union's strength and bargaining capacity to size.

This was a general practice from the management to reduce production at the time of settlement between management and union bodies to pressurise the union and offset any threats of strikes of production loss. But in the last few years, the shifting of production has seen partial or full closures of older units with established unions, and the job loss of permanent workers in those factories has created a wave of insecurity among other unions and permanent workers. Let us take few case studies to elaborate the point.

CASE 1: Omax Auto, Dharuhera Plant

Dharuhera plant of Omax Auto, established in 1986, is one of the oldest auto-part units in this belt. It was established adjacent to the premises of the oldest production unit of Hero Honda (now Hero MotoCorp) in Dharuhera, and since then it has been a core vendor company of the two-wheeler manufacture, supplying body frames and plating to Hero. The owner of Omax group, JK Mehta has been a long-standing family friend of the Munjals, the owner of the Hero group. Thus, the setting up of new plants of Hero in Gurgaon and Neemrana resulted in the expansion of Omax group in this belt as well. The profit generated from Dharuhera plant has been used to establish other units of Omax auto in this industrial belt, and outside too. Beside the Omax Auto main unit in Dharuhera, a sprocket unit too was started. Other plants of the Omax group in this industrial belt include – Omax Auto (Manesar), Automax (Binola), Speedomax (Sidhrwali), Omax Auto (Bawal), Century (Dharuhera) and so on. Among these units, the Dharuhera, Manesar and Binola units had stable and functioning workers unions. These unions, all affiliated to Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) are collectively known as ‘Omax group unions’. They co-ordinated among themselves on various issues. They even had co-ordinated strike action in 2015 during the settlement process in Omax Dharuhera plant.

The Omax plant in Dharuhera had 408 permanent workers in April 2017, when the company management moved for partial closure of the production unit of the frame section with 253 permanent workers. The plant had 388 contract workers who were working in the company for many years before they all were thrown out in February 2017. These old contract workers had a militant strike in 2005, even before the formation of the permanent workers union. After the strike, the Omax management had terminated the jobs of a section of old contract workers, and following the footsteps of the Hero management, started the-six-month contract system’ in 2006. In the beginning of 2017, around 450 contract workers were in the plant under the-six-month system’, a system where workers are taken just for six months. After the Omax union was formed in 2009, in course of three wage settlements in 2009, 2012 and 2015 the salary of the permanent workers increased substantially, up to Rs. 25,000. The old contract workers were also quite organised inside the plant, having their own representative body which maintained close contact with the permanent workers union. Additionally, workers unions in the units of vendor companies adjacent to the premises of Hero plant in Dharuhera - Rico Auto (supplier of clutch, hub, panel to Hero, union formed in 1998), Autofit (supplier of wheel and seat to Hero, union formed in 2013) and Omax Auto – co-ordinated their activities closely. Omax and Rico union took an active role in the union formation process in Autofit, and in the execution of the All India workers strikes in the Dharuhera belt in 2015 and 2016. This co-ordination threatened even the Hero management as it created uncertainty in the core supply chain. The increased salary, job security and other facilities of permanent workers after the union formation, the Omax union activities inside the plant and its intervention in the production process, its co-ordination with contract workers in the plant, its role in ‘Omax group unions’ and among vendor company unions of Hero in Dharuhera, pushed both Omax and Hero management to shift the production of Omax Auto from Dharuhera unit to other units with no union and cheap, non-permanent and flexible labour force. The quality of production of the Dharuhera unit of Omax was appreciated because of an experienced workforce. The workers union demanded that profit generated from Dharuhera plant was invested in the plant itself to modernise the plant and increase production. Yet the Omax management took less initiative to modernise the Dharuhera unit and set up new units and started shifting production to those units instead. Mechanisation and automation meant that less experienced permanent workers were required, and they could be substituted with a flexible labour force and robots. The union came in the way of retrenching permanent workers.

In 2015, the daily production of frames in the Omax Dharuhera plant was an average of 3200-3300 units. It gradually started to decline in 2016, coming down to 2200-2500 units. In 2015 their average sale was 20-22 crore/month which came down to 10.5 crore/month. Workers of Omax auto described how this was planned. A plant named 'Century' was opened near Dharuhera by the same owner and part of the production was shifted there. A store house was built beside this plant with a capacity to one month's store production. Some CNC machines and few robots were shifted from Dharuhera Omax unit to the new unit of Omax group, Speedomax in Sidhrawali, which manufactures frames and other parts same as Dharuhera unit of Omax. A defective boring machine was shifted from Speedomax to Dharuhera Omax and few new boring machines were shifted from Dharuhera Omax to Speedomax during off-days and holidays. A new unit was set up under the name of 'Autovision' and the welding machines from sprocket division of Omax Dharuhera plant were shifted there. Union leaders alleged that in this period raw materials like pipes, rods and so on used to be bought under Omax Dharuhera unit and were later siphoned off to Manesar and Sidhrawali plant, thus showing a fall in balance of payment for Omax Dharuhera unit. In January 2017, the management suddenly increased production to increase inventory. Overtime started. Initially the inventory was for three days which later expanded to 10 days and finally to one month.

To ensure that they had the required inventory to neutralise any possibility of strike action, the Omax Dharuhera management terminated the job of all their 388 old contract workers, on 1st February 2017. The terminated workers started protesting and started a sit-in dharna outside the factory gate. The situation got more tense when a terminated contract worker from Bihar, Ajay Pandey, left the protest site and went to his room and committed suicide on the evening of 13th February. His body was taken to the factory gate amid huge protests where Rico and Autofit workers joined the Omax workers. The management could diffuse the protest by using local police force, local village leaders and political leaders and announcing compensations. The contract workers - not allowed to assemble at the factory gate anymore - continued their protest in a nearby place for the next three months. Meanwhile 39 permanent workers, including the whole union body, were suspended with allegations of disruption in production and supporting terminated contract workers on them. On 12th April 2017, all the permanent workers went on strike inside the plant and joined the contract workers in their dharna. On 17th April 2017, the management went to the labour department for the closure of all units of Omax Dharuhera plant, except for the plating section. Meanwhile, the management took on new contract workers and introduced a new 'apprentice' system with around 100 apprentices to run the plating section. Later, the permanent workers except for those 39 suspended workers were taken back after they all signed a bond of good, and they were forced to take VRS. Only around 50 permanent workers were retained to run the production of parts in plating and sprocket sections. The labour department granted partial closure for the Omax Dharuhera unit, and a legal battle is going on between the workers and the management.

CASE 2: Rico Auto, Dharuhera Plant

The Dharuhera unit of Rico Auto, established in 1985, is the oldest unit of the company and a major vendor company of Hero MotoCorp. The workers union in this plant, Rico Auto Workers Union, formed in 1998 as an independent union, is one of the strongest unions in the entire industrial belt. The president of the Union, Rajkumar, is a most respected union leader in the belt, and has been part of all the trade union struggle committees in the last decade. In January 2018, there were 375 permanent workers and around 150 contract workers in the plant. The strong bargaining capacity of the union ensured a better proportion of permanent workers compared to contract workers. In last two decades since the union formation, around 200 contract workers became permanent in the plant. A strong union ensured a relatively better working condition, a disciplined workforce, less rejection in production and better quality of products. Thus, the management also did not have a serious conflict with the union. As of January 2018, the salary of permanent workers is around Rs. 30000 and that of the contract workers is around Rs. 12000.

But, since the last wage settlement process in 2016, the management escalated efforts to curb the activity of the union. Workers alleged that as soon as the union submitted their charter of demands in April 2016, the management gradually started shifting production to the Gurgaon unit of Rico. Owner of the Rico group, Arvind Kapoor, was a family friend of the late Brij Mohan Lal Munjal, founder of Hero Group. The Hero management approved this transfer of production despite the fact that there would be a larger transfer cost to supply components from the Gurgaon unit of Rico to the Dharuhera unit of Hero MotoCorp. The Hero management and Rico management signed an agreement on paper and the Rico management informed the union that the Hero management was apprehensive of labour unrest during the settlement process in Rico Dharuhera plant and therefore shifted a section of its orders of clutch, panel, hub, CFD, FFD and few other components to the Rico Gurgaon plant. After the settlement was done, the orders could come back to Dharuhera plant. But even after the settlement took place in November 2016, the orders never came back. Instead, the shifting of production continued. Only the production at the Maruti line and export line - for components of Maruti Suzuki (oil-ban, cylinder head, transmission, retainer input shaft, case oil pump and so on etc), export components for Cummins (to France), General Motors (oil-ban and bracket, export component) and Magna (three models of water pump housing) - continued. In September 2017, the production at the clutch and hub line of Hero MotoCorp completely stopped. Production was shifted to two plants in Gurgaon (one unit of Rico, and another unit under the name of 'Rasa') and partially to its new Bawal plants (with three units, under the name of Rico, Rasa and Kapbros, with only temporary workers). The monthly sale came down from 15-16 crores/month in July 2016 to six-seven crores/month in September 2017. Meanwhile 1500 new contract workers were appointed to run the production there. There is no union in any other plant of Rico except the Dharuhera and Gurgaon plants. According to the Rico workers, the Gurgaon plant union - formed after the defeat of workers struggle in 2009-10 - acts as a puppet union of the management.

The Rico management initially terminated the job of around 200 contract workers in mid-2017. Then the management declared a VRS package under which 95 permanent workers took VRS till April 2018, and ultimately applied to the Labour Secretary, Haryana for partial closure of production in Dharuhera plant and approval of termination of 118 workers working at Hero line on 26 March. Now there is an ongoing legal struggle between the management and the union.

CASE 3: Automax, Binola Plant

The Binola unit Automax, another unit of Omax group owned by JK Mehta, was established in 2007. A large section of workers (and machines) came from Tikri plant in Gurgaon at that time. The plant is situated on the National Highway-8 in between Manesar and Dharuhera. The plant had 325 permanent workers and a few hundred contract workers working in press shop, machine shop, railways division, New Holland tractor division, Honda line assembly shop, sprocket line for Hero, and piston rod division. It used to produce frame and engine parts for Hero Honda (now Hero Moto Corp), car parts and seat parts for Honda, front axle, upper covering, break, paddle and so on for New Holland tractor, driver cabin, engine cabin, latrine tank, diesel tank, and chassis for Indian Railways. All divisions of the company, except the railways division, are now closed.

The workers got greater bargaining power in 2009 after the formation of workers union. Two settlements in 2011 and 2014 saw a gross salary increase of Rs. 4850 and Rs. 5000 respectively. Now the permanent workers had a salary in between 15000 to 25000, depending on experience. Contract workers also saw an increase in salary and a batch of contract workers became permanent too. According to the workers, as the workers were preparing for another settlement in 2017, the company gradually started shifting production in the beginning of 2017 to other plants of the Omax group, namely, Speedomax (in Sidhrawali), Omax Manesar and Omax Bawal unit. Machines too were shifted to these plants, mainly to the Bawal unit of Omax. The Hero Sprocket line monthly turnover came down from around two crores to 50 lakhs in a few months. Showing lack of production, the company management terminated the job of 170 contract workers in the period between 18 May and 26 May. Then on 26th June the workers saw a notice that 325 permanent workers were terminated. The workers started a dharna, organised protests in front of the company gate and tried to stop the shifting of machines from Automax unit to other units. However, the process of shifting machines continued under police protection. Only the railways division is now being run by contract workers, and the other divisions are closed. A symbolic dharna of terminated workers continues at the factory gate even after almost a year.

CASE 4: Endurance Manesar Plant

Endurance, a vendor company of Honda (Manesar), Hero MotoCorp (Gurgaon), Graziano (Noida), Maruti Suzuki (Gurgaon), Suzuki Bike and others, produces auto parts like crank cases, covers and grips through aluminium die casting. The Manesar unit of Endurance, which now has 16 plants in India, was established in 2005. The Managing Director of the plant is Anuran Jain, a cousin of Rahul Bajaj of Bajaj Auto. There are 158 permanent workers and around 200 contract workers. The workers formed their union in 2009. Three wage settlements saw an increase in permanent workers' salaries and other facilities. The average salary of the permanent workers is now Rs. 35000-37000.

In a conversation with us in January 2018 the workers and the union leaders reported that, with the increase of bargaining power and salary of workers, the management has been shifting production to other plants, which gained momentum in the last one year. One part of the production has been shifted to other units of Endurance, where the workers have much less salary. Even some of the parts for the Honda Manesar plant - which were earlier produced in the Manesar unit - come from the Pant Nagar unit of Endurance in Uttarakhand. According to them the monthly turnover of the plant was around 14-15 crores in 2013-14. Now it has come down to 10-11 crore. Four years back there were 23 die casting machines, now there are 13 machines. Other machines have been shifted

to other plants. Apart from shifting production to other Endurance units, a significant part of production has been outsourced to smaller second and third tier auto parts companies. Earlier the aluminium melting process took place inside the plant. Now this operation has been outsourced. A few casting machines have been outsourced to smaller companies for cheap production. The management has no plan to bring new contracts to the Manesar unit. They have stopped giving production incentives to workers. The workers informed us that the management is preparing to file an application to the labour department for closing down this unit.

in January this year the Gurgaon unit of Napino Auto closed and nearly 150 permanent workers have been terminated. The workers, led by their union, are in a sit-in dharna for the last few months. The Manesar unit of Omax now faces closure. The company has already filed an application for it. The union/workers of the Gurgaon unit of Bajaj Motors are also at the receiving end of large scale shifting of production to other units.

These incidents of closure are not the results of lack in demand, recurring loss or outdated capacity. They manifest the restlessness of capital to tap a cheaper, more flexible and non-unionised workforce, to utilise better subsidies, cheap resources and tax exemption offered by the government in new locations, to split up production in many parts to reduce uncertainty and to mechanise the production further. The shifting of production and the threat of partial/full closure of a plant has substantially reduced the bargaining power of unions in the older plants and has appeared as a serious threat. The capacity of workers to control production and affect production by using a strike as a weapon action has, to some extent, been blunted. The militancy of the established unions has been challenged by the mobility and greater bargaining power of capital in last few years. The workers claim that this is illegal. The workers are arguing that when the company is profitable, the internal shifting of production among its different units should not get approval for partial/full closure and even if it does, there should not be termination of permanent jobs of workers, as the workers are ready to get transferred to new units.

2. Changes in the Labour Regime: Contractualisation and Informalisation

The process of contractualisation got stronger in this belt after the Maruti Gurgaon plant workers three-month strike in 2000 and subsequent crushing of the workers union in the Gurgaon plant. Contractualisation (hiring of a new workforce via contractors to run the production as the permanent workers were on strike) was used as an instrument to break the workers strike and the union. After that, a section of permanent workers was coerced to take VRS and the internal segmentation of the workforce in core production in terms of permanent and contract workers increased. This process of contractualisation was followed in other plants in the auto-belt as well. In 2005, when both permanent and contract workers of Honda Manesar plant formed a union together and succeeded, contract workers had high hopes from newly formed permanent workers union. But within 3-4 years, in the course of two settlements between permanent workers union and the Honda management, the gap in salary, working condition and facilities between permanent and contract workers became quite significant, and there was no particular opposition to the process of contractualisation by the permanent workers union.

The permanent workers union in Honda did not support the contract workers wildcat strike in 2008. Nevertheless, because of the presence of workers union and a mechanism of collective bargaining inside the plant - some improvement in salary and working conditions and canteen and

transport facilities took place for contract workers as well. That prompted the contract workers to support the struggle of permanent workers for their union formation in different plants in Gurgaon-Manesar industrial belt in the period 2005-2011. But, after a few years, gaps in salaries, working conditions and facilities were visible. The workload shifted from permanent workers to contract workers gradually. Unions bargained for and ensured some basic facilities and minimal increase in salary for contract workers along with their own demand, but hardly resisted the process of increasing contractualisation. Contract workers in this period had attempted several times to resort to wildcat strikes and organise themselves separately (for example, in the Omax Dharuhera plant in 2005, in the Honda Manesar plant in 2008 and in the Hero Honda Dharuhera plant in 2009) but did not have much success.

The decade between the defeat of the Maruti Gurgaon struggle (in 2000) and the beginning of the Maruti Manesar struggle (in 2011) shows this strong process of contractualisation taking shape in core production process. They accounted for nearly two-third to three-fourth of the total workforce in all auto assembler units including Maruti, Honda and Hero Honda, and major first tier suppliers. *In many cases (including the Honda Manesar plant) the job contract was renewed by the contractor with a break of three-four days every six months to ensure that the worker could not claim to have worked 240 days a year and hence could not have claimed to be in 'continuous service' or to be permanent.* However, the same contract workers were usually retained (even when the contractor changed) as their experience and skill were important to the company. The labour regime inside the plant consisted of permanent workers (on company pay-roll), trainee workers (on probation, usually for two-three years before they are made permanent), apprentices (one year) and contract workers (shown under different contractor/contract agency).

The Maruti Manesar plant workers struggle in 2011-12 was effectively the first one that seriously challenged the contract system, struggled for the permanency of contract workers and put forward the possibility of a common struggle against the internal segmentation of the workforce. Permanent workers struck work and occupied the plant in October 2011 as 1200 contract workers, who earlier had joined the strike with permanent workers in June and September, were not taken back by the management. Eventually the contract workers were taken back. In February 2012 the first demand that the union put forward before the management in its Charter of Demands, was the permanency of all contract workers. As the management refused to consider this demand, the bargaining process suffered, tension escalated and finally there was a clash between workers and the management and their bouncers on 18 July, leading to the death of one HR manager and a subsequent crackdown on workers.

The 18 July incident exposed some threats of the contract systems to the management. Firstly, the similar working condition faced by the permanent and contract workers and the bonding that develops through working in the line side by side for years brings the permanent and contract workers together in the struggle against the management. Secondly, as the contract workers were not on the company payroll, they had less attachment to the plant and less direct control by the management. After the incident, the Maruti Manesar management terminated all 1800 contract workers (along with 546 regular workers) and declared the abolishment of the contract system in core production. But that declaration did not mean that they would substitute the contract workforce by regular workers. The management introduced a new category of 'temporary workers (TW)'. They were fresh recruits directly from campus interviews or off-campus interviews and in the company payroll for seven months only (to meet the condition of less than 240 days a year of work). After seven months, the entire batch of workers would be removed, and a new, fresh batch would be taken. The management has a database of workers and can call them as required.

TWs became the largest part of workforce in Maruti Manesar, replacing contract workers. This holds, even today. Following Maruti's example, many companies started this practice of 'fixed term' workers. The six-month contract system too became a significant practice, where a batch of contract workers was taken for six months only. After this period, they were replaced by a new batch. These practices of 'Temporary Workers', 'fixed term' workers, 'six-month contracts' created a workforce that is insecure, has lesser interaction with permanent workers, and is difficult to organise.

Another process of informalisation of the workforce, which started mainly in the Bawal industrial belt in 2012-13 onwards and diffused elsewhere, involved the practice of making diploma holders or B.Tech degree-holders part of workforce under the categories of 'Diploma Trainee (DT)', 'Diploma Apprentice', 'Engineering Trainee', 'Diploma Engineering Trainee' and so on. These unemployed degree holders used to come to work from distant places such as like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh and worked as 'trainees' in these companies for a period of one to three years. They were on the company payroll, but as staff and not under the category of 'workers'. Yet they had to do the same work in the core production process as the other workers inside the plant.

In the period of 2013-18, these two forms of workers started dominating over permanent workers and contract workers working for a long time. This had significant effect on the strength, confidence and role of unions and collective bargaining mechanism. More recently, a new category has been added to the informalisation process. Those with a 12th pass certificate or admission in a college or an ITI institute are taken by the company under the categories of 'Student Trainee', 'National Employability Enhancement Mission (NEEM) Trainee' and so on, under the Central Government Scheme of 'Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojna' and offered a stipend below minimum wage with the promise of a certificate after three years.

Three conditions have facilitated these processes of informalisation of work:

- Changes in production process with mechanisation, automation, new technologies and division of labour have made workers more disposable. Apart from some very specific types of work, experience and skill are being made increasingly redundant.
- An unemployment crisis has created a huge reserve army of labour. Those waiting for a job outside the company gates are ready to accept any type of employment condition.
- The changes in labour laws (changes in Apprentice Act 1961, Contract Labour Act 1970, introduction of 'Fixed Term Contract' etc) and an institutional mechanism (Labour department, Labour Court and Industrial Tribunal) reluctant to enforce the existing labour laws have facilitated the informalisation of work.

We looked into a few representative case studies to understand the process of informalisation of work and changes in labour regimes:

CASE 1: Maruti Suzuki Gurgaon Plant

Maruti Suzuki has three plants – two assembly plants (in Gurgaon and Manesar) and one engine plant (in Manesar). The labour regime is more or less similar in these three plants. Let us look at a representative case of the Gurgaon plant, the oldest one.

This plant has its workers divided in following categories – permanent workers, company trainees, contract workers, apprentices, temporary workers (TW-1 and TW-2), and student trainees.

There are around 10,000 workers working in the plant, of which around 2200 are permanent workers. The rest are temporary workers of various categories and probationers. Among the various categories, the maximum number are TWs.

Temporary workers (TWs) are employed by the company itself. The company officials go the ITI campuses and conduct tests to recruit them. They are taken for a period of seven months, after which they are retrenched. For example, in June 2017, the company management hired around 2000 TWs from Patiala ITI itself (among around 11000 candidates) and distributed them in three plants of Maruti Suzuki. The test includes a common written test for all categories comprising of questions from different technical fields (welding, fitting and so on) and general knowledge. One or two months after the written test the qualifiers have an interview and then a medical test. Then the qualified candidates have to wait for a confirmation from the company. There is an initial training period of seven days, which takes place in the company training room. Then there is a training of around 21 days in the production line on the shop floor, under the supervision of an old TW. The company management has the database of workers and their various 'records'. When they are retrenched after seven months, they are sometimes called back as TW-2, but with a minimum gap of seven months.

TW-2 workers are those who have an experience as TW-1 and are called back by the company after a gap. They undergo a medical test, a training period of five days and then directly join the production process.

After the completion of TW-2, the management sometimes tests them and some of the TW-2 workers are retained as company trainees (CT). The last such test took place on 15 December 2017 in Faridabad, where 600 TW-2 workers qualified as CT. Among these 600 workers, only two workers were from Haryana, as the company now does not take local workers. Company trainees are made permanent after two years.

Apart from that, there are workers in the production line as 'apprentices' (either one year or two years of apprenticeship). They are mostly from Haryana. There are contract workers in line, who are not in the payroll of the company. They are significant in numbers. Those who are working for a long time (five-10 years or more) as contract workers, may get a chance to be qualified as a CT. In December 2017 a contract worker became CT at the age of 53.

Additionally, there is a new category of workers, numbering 1000-1500, called 'Student Trainees'. This category started last year and workers under this category are increasing in number inside the plant. They are taken for three years and after that they are supposed to get an ITI degree as well. They are under training for three months before they join the production line. They work full time in lines then and there is a two-hour study class on Sunday each week.

Categories	Permanent	TW-1	TW-2	CT	ST	Apprentice	Contract
Salary (in Rs. in January 2018)	40,000-45,000 (starting)	19,800 (in hand)	19,800 (in hand)	19,800 (in hand)	10,400	13,500	17,000
Period	--	7 months	7 months	2 years	3 years	3 years	--
Dress	Light yellow shirt, slate colour pant	Light violet shirt, chocolate colour pant	Light violet shirt, chocolate colour pant	Light blue shirt, blue pant,	Blue shirt, slate colour pant	Light violet shirt, chocolate colour pant	Dress provided according to contractor

All these workers do more or less similar kind of work in the production line. For a critical section - like the Vehicle Inspection (V.I.) department, where 90 workers work on four lines to check 930 cars in each shift with a cycle time of two minutes per car - there are only 10-15 permanent workers. There are around 10 student trainees, and the rest are temporary workers and contract workers.

CASE 2: India Japan Lighting (IJL), Bawal

India Japan Lighting, a manufacturer of automobile lighting and supplier of head lamps and rear lamps mostly to Maruti Suzuki and also to other companies like Toyota Kirloskar, Honda Siel, Tata Motors, Yamaha and so on, has a unit in the Bawal industrial area since November 2006. It is a joint venture between Lucas TVS of Chennai and Koito Manufacturing Company Ltd of Japan. The study of the process of contractualisation and informalisation of labour in this plant is of significance as IJL was one of those plants in these industrial belts from where the informalisation of labour in terms of 'Diploma Apprentice (DA)', 'Diploma Trainee (DT)' and so on started in 2013. The 'NEEM trainee' is a recent feature too.

The main burden of production is on the Diploma Act Apprentices (DAA), NEEM trainees and contract workers. Each month around 30-40 DAAs join the company. Though they are diploma holders from polytechnic colleges and supposed to be trained as supervisors, they do all kinds of manual work (trolley pulling, loading-unloading, warehouse maintenance and so on) and run machines. They are supposed to become Diploma Engineering Associate (DEA) after one year, then Diploma Engineering Trainee (DET) after two years and then should join staff category after one more year. But only a few could complete these four years and then be made staff in the company. All these categories of workers are not considered 'workers' and thus cannot invoke labour law rights.

DET workers raised their demands to be made permanent in the company. The management turned a deaf ear to their demands and they tried to form union in August 2017. They filed the union registration process on 9th August, and the company fired all 77 workers who were involved in the process. Contract workers were taken in their place.

Workers as 'NEEM Trainee', all diploma holders, are taken by the company under the 'skill development' programme of the central government. They get no ESI, PF, no company uniform, no identity card of the company (instead, they get an I-card from National Employability Enhancement

Mission, the organisation that mediates the process and supplies workers). There is only a registrar at the factory gate where they have to sign for 'in/out'. They get no other facilities apart from canteen and bus facilities. They are given no extra training and work in production lines. In each shift, there is a NEEM supervisor along with company supervisors. They are all from outside Haryana and from states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

There are different categories under which workers work in this plant.

Categories	DAA (Diploma Act Apprentice)	DEA (Diploma Engineering Associate)	DET (Diploma Engineering Trainee)	NEEM trainee	Contract	Company Trainee (CT)	Permanent
Period	1 year	2 years	1 year	3 years	--	2 years	--
Salary (in January 2018)	9,500	10,500	12,500- 14,000	7000- 7,500	8200 (minimum wage)	15000	27000
Number	300-400	100	Earlier 77, now all fired.	250 (incr.)	300-400	19	89

If we look at the internal composition of the workforce, then there are three main shops in the plant, namely Moulding, Surface Treatment and Assembly. Among a total of 143 workers in the Moulding shop, only 28 are permanent. Among 23 machines, 18 machines are completely run by the non-permanent workers. In the Surface Treatment shop, among 350 workers, only 33 are permanent. In the Assembly shop, among 350 workers, only 30 are permanent. In the quality department, among around 150 workers, only 8 workers are permanent, Warehouse has no permanent worker.

CASE 3: NSK Rane, Bawal

NSK Rane, a major vendor company of Maruti Suzuki, supplies electric power steering for Maruti 4-wheelers. From 2012, informalisation of work picked up with the introduction of around 150 Temporary Operator Trainee (TOT). From 2013, Diploma Operator Engineering Trainee (DEOT) was introduced. Workers under this category are taken by the company after their diploma for a period of three years. They gradually replaced the contract workers and became the main component of the workforce, though not recognised as 'workers' and counted under the category of 'staff', thus outside the rights and protection of labour laws.

Since last year, Student Trainees - whom the workers call RCMT as they have come from RCMT college, Rudrapur (Uttarakhand) and have RCMT written on their uniform - have joined the workforce under "Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojna". They work in the core production process and attend a class each week on Sunday. They get a stipend of Rs. 8000, but a salary in hand of Rs. 5500, as the remaining part is shown as expenditure for shelter (provided by company). They are not on the payroll of the company, and their only record with the company is the 'in/out' register at the company gate.

Categories	Permanent	Contract	DEOT	RCMT
Number	122	250 (around)	400 (around)	100 (around)
Salary/Stipend	25,000-30,000	Minimum wage	11,000-12,000	5500 in hand (stipend)
Period	---	---	3 years	3 years

CASE 4: Rockman, Bawal

Rockman is a vendor company of Hero MotoCorp and Honda. It supplies wheel, chain set, crank set and so on to two-wheeler makers. The Bawal plant, established in 2014, is the most recent among its five units in India.

During the survey period, the workers were on strike and had staged a sit-in dharna outside the place. The strike started from 19 September 2017. Before that, the company had a workforce of around 1000, of which only 44 were permanent. The company took 150 workers in training in 2014 and promised permanency after one year of training, but even after 3-4 years, those workers have not been made permanent. 20 workers, who were from Jharkhand, reported that they were falsely promised a permanent job at that time of joining. The salary of permanent workers was 10,000-15000, salary of trainees was around 9000 and for contract workers, who were shown under seven different contractors, was of minimum wage. The workers demanded permanency and salary hikes and initiated the process of union formation in September 2017. The management suspended six workers and stopped the workers at the factory gate on 19 September to write a good conduct bond and an apology letter. As the workers refused and started an indefinite sit-in demonstration at the factory gate, the company management started recruiting new contract workers to run the production. The workers reported that to break the strike, almost 2000 workers were recruited inside the plant. The case of Rockman is an example of informality of employment conditions and contracts between the company and the workers.

3. Legal Framework and Institutions

Earlier, the main institutions to deal with labour matters were the labour court, industrial tribunal and labour department. As criminal and civil courts and police-administration now take an increasingly proactive role on matters related to labour disputes and labour unrest, the role of the labour court and labour department take a back seat. Thus, the process of collective bargaining mechanism involving tripartite settlement of workers, management personnel and labour department officials under section 12 (3) of Industrial Disputes Act 1947 has been negatively affected. In absence of a bargaining and conciliation mechanism, labour disputes became labour unrest/conflict/militancy, and in recent years, for such incidents, some general patterns have developed:

- Labour Court: To curb subjectivity/assertion of labour inside the plant, the worker leaders are terminated. Though terminating worker leaders falls under punishable 'unfair labour practice' under the fifth schedule of Industrial Disputes Act 1947 and there are procedures for terminating permanent workers, - such as providing a charge sheet, conducting 'domestic enquiry' and giving the workers scope for self-defence under 'principles of natural justice' and providing evidence to establish the 'misconduct' of worker, and then following company processes to decide quantum of punishment under labour law - the management often prefers to terminate workers bypassing all these processes. On an average it takes at least a decade to prove an 'illegal termination' in the labour court. It becomes extremely difficult for the workers to afford prolonged legal and court appearances. Even if the workers challenge any 'illegal termination', in many cases they are compelled to settle out of court. In the last decade the labour court is dealing with thousands of termination matters only from the auto belt including around 2500 Maruti workers, around 2500 Honda workers, around 300 Aisin workers, 170 Ahresty workers, 38 Daikin workers, around 200 Toyoda Gosei workers, around 40 Posco workers, around 50 Asti contract workers, around 100 Hero MotoCorp contract workers, 18 SPM workers and 29 Munjal Kiri workers. The 24 Maruti workers who got terminated in 2000 won their case of illegal termination in 2015-16 in the lower court, but the court ordered no reinstatement as they were no longer fit for new production regime, and instead ordered compensation of few lakhs. The company has even challenged the order in the High Court. This legal structure acts as deterrent for workers to get 'justice' via law.
- For any disputes regarding union formation, the labour department these days cancels the application files showing various reasons, giving the management sufficient time to contain the dispute and crush such initiative of union formation by terminating leaders (Cases of SPM, Aisin, Daikin second file). Sometimes the management gets a stay order on the union process by getting it challenged by few workers from the civil court (cases of Honda Tapukara and Daikin first file). In such cases the only way for the workers is to fight a protracted legal battle in the courts.
- In case of a labour unrest, the management immediately gets a stay order from the civil court against assembly of protesting workers inside the plant, within 100-500 meters of the factory gate (with the implication that the workers cannot have any protest or sit-in demonstration near the plant, as after 500 meters, the area belongs to the premises of another factory), affecting the freedom of association.
- In case of any strike/mass protest of workers, the issues are treated as a 'law and order' problem, rather than a labour dispute. It leads to repression on workers struggle and criminalisation of an entire trade union movement. The incidents of police lathi charge and consequent criminal cases on workers including imprisonment have taken place quite a few times in last few years. For example - police lathi charge and firing on striking Shriram Piston workers in Bhiwadi and putting 29 workers in jail on 14 April 2015, police lathi charge on striking Honda Tapukara workers and jailing of 44 Honda workers under charges of rioting, loot, attempt to murder on 16 February 2016, lathi charge and tear gas on striking Ahresty workers in Bawal and arresting workers under section 107,151 etc on 21 January 2017, police lathi charge and arresting of around 400 striking Aisin workers in Rohtak on 30 April 2017. All these incidents took place at the factory premises and in all such cases the entire workforce has been terminated, with the leaders facing trials in criminal courts under various charges. The workers have not been allowed to demonstrate peacefully anywhere in the industrial belt.

• There is often an argument that the labour laws in India are not industry friendly. Few aspects are particularly emphasised in that respect – the difficulty to 'hire and fire', and the obligation of keeping permanent workers. In the section on 'contractualisation and informalisation' we discussed the ease of hiring an entire workforce, cheap and flexible to 'fire', those that are not even recognised as 'workers' under the definition of labour law. It requires a prolonged legal battle to establish that whatever their category and designation, they participate in core production process as regular workers. Secondly, as we saw above, even the process of terminating permanent workers has been so easy for management because of the legal hurdles before workers. In the last decade, except for the Belsonica workers in 2016, no other workers have won their cases of illegal termination in the entire industrial belt. Manmohan Singh, the terminated ex-general secretary of Daikin union, won the case in lower court but is fighting the management in the high court for the last two years. Sudhir, ex-general secretary of Ruchi Beer union is similarly fighting the management in the upper court even with an order of reinstatement from the lower court for the last four years. Thirdly, section 10 of the Contract Labour Regulation and Abolition Act 1970 says that for perennial nature of a job (taking place at least 120 days a year), for core production processes and for permanent nature of work, employing contract workers is illegal. And, the company cannot use 'sham/camouflage contracts' to deny the workers a permanent job/ permanent nature of work. A state level contract labour advisory committee has the power to decide whether a contract is a 'sham contract' or not (which is the case for all companies which employ workers, controls their working condition and directs them what to do, but shows them under different contractors). Interestingly, the contract labour advisory committee has been constituted only in the last year after repeated attempts from the workers side. In this auto belt, worker leaders cannot recollect any incident of declaring a contract 'illegal' or regularising contract workers for doing permanent nature of work for years by labour bodies or labour court. The current changes in labour law, particularly in terms of employing apprentices, 'fixed term contracts, changes in rules in trade union formation etc, which the Central Trade Unions are protesting, have been in application in this belt for many years in some form or other. Thus, the labour law regulation has hardly been a constraining factor for the industries here. Now these are getting formalised with the changes in law.

4. Whither Workers Struggle and Organisation: 'Associational' and 'Structural' Power to 'Universal Worker'

The trade union movement, which was rooted in the struggles of 1960-70 under a Fordist production regime found it difficult to engage with the new wave of plant level workers militancy in new industrial regions, particularly in the auto-belts. With the splitting up of production in many units after the collapse of Fordist regime and in the era of economic globalisation and the emergence of production networks, the earlier associational power of thousands of workers working under one shade got changed. In the new industrial regions, with 'just-in-time' production, one main feature of recent plant-level workers struggle was that the militancy of the workers was triggered by the worsening working condition in the new production and labour regime and their confidence. Thus, the central trade unions could not appropriately represent these struggles.

This tendency was visible not only in the Gurgaon-Neemrana belt but in other industrial regions such as Chennai-Sriperumbudur, Pune-Nasik, Rudrapur-Haridwar and Ahmedabad-Sanad-Dholra, reflected in the militant struggles of Maruti, Honda, Hyundai, Tata Nano, Toyota and others. But before it could generalise to a representative tendency of recent workers struggle in organised manufacturing sector, the restructuring of production and labour regime by capital substantially reduced workers bargaining strength. Workers subjectivity at the important locations of production networks is either being contained and co-opted (among high-salaried permanent workers) or being smashed/dispersed. The main burden of production is now on a category of 'universal workers', young contract/trainee/temporary workers/diploma workers and others, who do not imagine getting a permanent job and are not attached to any particular factory for more than few years. How the subjectivity of this section of workforce will be articulated is a difficult question. But beyond plant-level struggles, they have appeared as a 'social category' in the new industrial regions.

In recent times, there have some instances where their anger and assertion got expressed in various forms, recognising their capacity to affect production. One example is the strike of 250 diploma apprentices in NSK Rane factory in Bawal on 12 February 2012, demanding their right to get production incentives, a right to form a union, a right to get permanent jobs after completion of three years of apprenticeship and expressing anger over excessive work pressure and increase of target to 490 units from 435 units per line per shift. These DEOT workers run four of the five assembly lines, and thus exercise significant control over production. Unlike permanent workers, they could take a risk as they had little to lose. Production got reduced to 20-25 units per line per shift in lines two, three, four and five. The strike affected the supply of steering to Maruti. The GM H.R. Ravichandran fled to Bawal from Chennai immediately. The management started dialogue with 10 representatives of DEOTs in the presence of labour officials and local administration. But the demands were impossible to acknowledge, as they would set a dangerous precedent. Ultimately after three days of strikes all the workers together decided not to work in the plant and all resigned. These types of incidents put forward the questions of (legal) rights of these temporary workers. They are now going to be a majority in production, and they have a right to get recognised as 'workers', form unions, get incentives, get permanency and other benefits.

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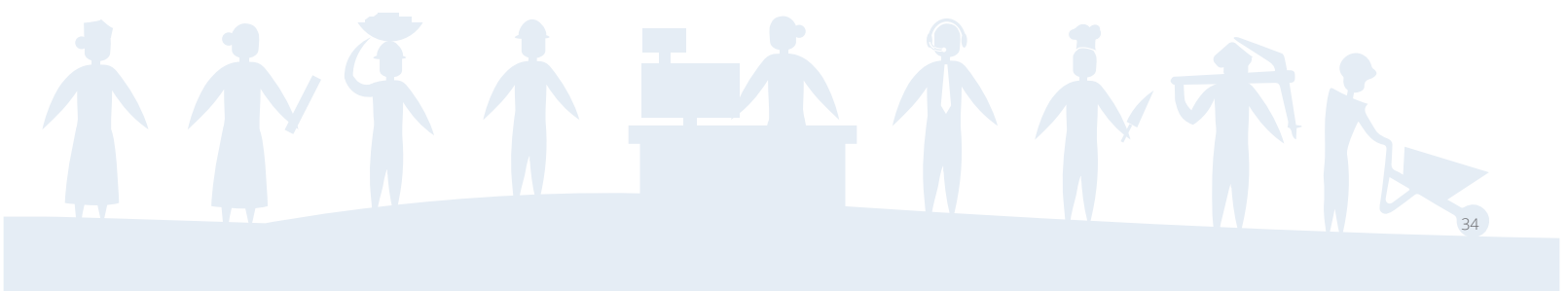
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