

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

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New Trade Union World Briefing (8 pages):

Sri Lanka: trade union breakthrough in the export processing zones

Brussels, 31 August 2006 (ICFTU online): With their 80 to 85% female workforce, the 9 Sri Lankan export processing zones (EPZs) largely produce textiles, though also toys, diamonds, tobacco, electronic goods and even tyres.

The new TUW Briefing

(<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991224954&Language=EN>), based on interviews conducted by journalists within the Sri Lankan EPZs, reveals the indecent living conditions experienced by workers in these factories. Accommodation is a particularly serious problem for the many young women who have left the countryside to crowd into buildings near the zones, where they rent rooms at exorbitant prices compared to their wages and with very unhygienic conditions, and where they are frequently exposed to sexual harassment, especially on their way to work.

Factory owners are granted tax incentives and other benefits, including favourable terms for provision of water, electricity and IT facilities.

And, above all, the zones can boast that they provide investors with a clearly anti-union environment. The zones are physically impenetrable and look like army bases, with unauthorised persons automatically barred access.

All manner of sackings, harassment, insults and threats are deployed to discourage any stirrings of trade union activism, and employers often collude with police and thugs to scare or attack trade unionists.

"Employers in the zones have a tacit agreement not to recruit anyone known to be a trade unionist", adds Anton Marcus, General Secretary of the union FTZWU, who is quoted in this briefing.

Whilst the number of recognised unions in the Sri Lankan EPZs is still low, the briefing shows that the unions have started to breach the fortress of the export processing zones, thereby raising hopes that the most basic workers' rights, that are currently being flaunted there, will gradually be respected.

The briefing tackles a range of questions - including "What strategies are these unions using to organise in the EPZs, which are known as anti-union bastions in Sri Lanka as elsewhere? What obstacles have they met? What concrete results have been achieved by the workers who organise to defend themselves? How can you combat the traditional opposition from employers and the authorities, whilst adopting strategies to include the young and female workforce?" - and come up with answers that are illustrated by concrete examples and testimonies.

The first Sri Lankan employers to have moved towards social dialogue also provide encouraging signs. "Little by little, I have understood the value of having real trade union delegates, who can ask advice from their federation, who are learning how to engage in dialogue, who

understand what things might be improved and always prefer to achieve this through negotiation", explains a human resources manager from a textile company that produces clothes for the Liz Claiborne label, amongst others.

Please also read the Spotlight interview on Gerald Lodwick (Sri Lanka - NWC), ""A mixture of prudence and perseverance have helped us set up trade unions in the export processing zones":

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991224955&Language=EN>

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