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Spotlight on Gerald Lodwick (NWC-Sri Lanka)

"A mixture of prudence and perseverance have helped us set up trade unions in the export processing zones"

Brussels, 31 August 2006 (ICFTU online): The NWC (National Workers Congress), which is a WCL affiliate, is one of the Sri Lankan unions that manages to organise workers in the export processing zones (EPZs). At present they have approximately 7,000 members in 45 factories, 6 of which have recognized unions. 2 collective agreements have also been signed in these areas, which have traditionally been hostile towards unions. Gerald Lodwick, NWC Deputy Secretary General explains the strategy used to achieve these results.

Is it much harder to organise workers in Sri Lanka's EPZs?

According to the law, all workers' rights, including union rights, are recognised equally both inside and outside these zones. That said there are several obstacles preventing the exercise of those rights. One of the problems is that these areas are regarded as "high-security zones" and are surrounded by physical barriers. As trade unionists we are only allowed to enter a zone if our union is recognised in one of the companies in it. Before we can get such recognition, we therefore have to try to meet the workers outside these areas, for example in their homes or on their way back from the factory. Since the vast majority of these workers are young girls we have to be very careful how we approach them to avoid giving them a bad impression. Firstly, we have to gain their trust.

How do you gain that trust?

Many Sri Lankan trade unions are linked to one or other political party and do not see protection of workers as their constant priority. We have to explain to the workers that we ourselves have no political links. We have set up union offices near the zones that we call "friendship houses", which do not look like trade union Centres on the outside, so as not to scare off workers. These friendship houses provide a whole range of services (such as libraries, newspapers, television, English classes, etc). The workers see them principally as meeting places, but when they come in we raise the issue of their rights and tell them how we can defend them by setting up unions. We explain that the unions have nothing against companies, employers or institutions, but provide protection for workers, for example when they are sacked unfairly. When a worker shows an interest in setting up a union, we find out how strong the company's finances are, so that we do not end up organising a company that is about to become bankrupt. That would only support employers' arguments that unions bring bankruptcy to companies. We then train the worker so that s/he has the skills needed for recruiting colleagues.

How do employers react?

When the EPZs were first opened all the employers were systematically anti-union. After many years of contacts with the BOI (the "Board of Investment" that manages the zones) and the Ministry of Labour, we have managed to open some people's eyes to the advantages of having trade unions that are not politically aligned. We show them that as well as defending workers' rights we want to make them aware of their duties towards their employers. The employers have much to gain from negotiating collective agreements since these provide them with a guarantee that during their period of application there will be no calling of spontaneous strikes and stoppages will only be held following a warning and negotiations. We are also very careful not to go too far and do not condone throwing stones at factory windows, for instance, or causing any damage, since if we are calling for our rights to be respected we also have a duty to respect the rights and property of others.

Is that enough to placate the employers?

Some firms remain hostile and sack union activists. That has happened to our members but we have protested with strikes and court cases and have got the people reinstated. We are still very cautious before asking for a union to be recognised. Sri Lankan law states that a union must be recognised when it represents 40% of a company's work force. If the management is opposed to recognition we can ask the Labour Ministry to hold a referendum in the factory, but our strategy is to do this when we have recruited at least 80% of the workers in a company so as to avoid any nasty surprises in the vote (such as many workers being too scared to come and vote).

Do you cooperate with international organisations?

We always inform the WCL about our work. It is often helpful when European trade union leaders contact Sri Lankan employers to ensure them that we are equally committed to a moderate form of social dialogue. The international trade union organisations are also very good at contacting the purchasers of products produced in the EPZs, for instance in the clothing industry. The Clean Clothes campaign helped us several times with putting pressure on those purchasers.

It seems the NWC has also done some good work with Sri Lankan migrant workers in recent years.

We have signed two cooperation agreements with host countries receiving Sri Lankan migrant workers. The most recent was with the GFJTU (General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions), the ICFTU affiliate in Jordan, where roughly 75,000 Sri Lankans are working, mainly women in domestic work. We also have an agreement with a WCL affiliate in Cyprus, DEOK (Democratic Labour Federation of Cyprus). About 40,000 Sri Lankans are working in Cyprus in the agricultural sector. Both those agreements cover sharing of knowledge and on-the-spot help. The NWC has established the Migrant Services Centre [MSC], a social arm of the trade union to provide support to migrant workers and their families. The MSC has set

up a network of 27 migrant workers' associations throughout the country. Before leaving the country the MSC informs the workers about the host country, their rights, the labour legislation and what they can expect. Our partner unions promise to help the Sri Lankan migrant workers with any job-related problems during their stay. This is important since they are generally not happy with the services provided by the embassies when problems arise. The Cypriot trade union has also agreed to collect affiliation fees from our migrant workers and to send us a proportion of those.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

Read also the TUW Briefing:: "Sri Lanka : unions overcome barriers to organising in export processing zones":

<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991224954&Language=EN>

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