

Tension is mounting in Bangladesh

Traditionally, Bangladesh has solely relied on its cheap labour to attract investors to its clothes wear industry, which forms a key part of its economy. This lack of vision might lead to major problems from 2005 onwards against the backdrop of a far more liberalised market. The Bangladeshi unions try to help the poorest workers but are faced with a very hostile and sometimes violent attitude from employers and the police.

Tension is mounting in Bangladesh: on 1 January 2005, the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC) will expire (see boxed article) and Bangladeshi exporters will no longer be protected by the quotas restricting imports of textiles and clothing from more competitive countries like China and India. The problem is that the clothing industry forms the backbone of the Bangladeshi economy. With its 130 million inhabitants, Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world - clothes exports represent two-thirds of its export revenues and clothes wear factories employ 1.8 million people, which is half of the total industrial labour force. Almost 80% of these workers are women.

Some experts are making alarmist predictions and are suggesting that ending the ATC could lead to the loss of 1 million jobs in Bangladesh's clothing industry. 15 million jobs in related sectors of activity, e.g. transportation, button making, meals outside factories and so on, are also at risk. The statistics for trade in products that are already quota-free (handbags, bras, baby clothes for example) give some idea of what could happen. For example, the USA's imports of baby clothing from China more than quadrupled in 2002, whilst those from Bangladesh fell by 16%. Other types of clothing show similar trends.

There is some more bad news for Bangladesh - as well as a dramatic rise in its imports from China, the USA has started to buy more clothing (albeit it on a smaller scale) from the Caribbean and sub-Saharan African countries, two



A million jobs soon to go in Bangladesh? (Photo: S.G.)

regions which have recently been granted customs-free access to the US market for their clothing. At the same time, the USA has retained high taxes on clothing imported from Bangladesh. The other major market for Bangladeshi exporters, the European Union (EU), has scrapped import duties however this only relates to a few types of clothing which contain a certain proportion of materials. The lack of raw materials, including cotton, is poses a headache for clothing companies, which have to import them. Bangladeshi unions and employers are

now asking the EU to relax its rules on countries of origin.

Bangladesh does, admittedly, have some strong cards to play in the more competitive market which will exist from 2005. In addition to its labour force, which is one of the cheapest in the world (the Bangladeshi minimum wage under 16 dollars a month), it can rely on the good quality of its products and the solid business relations that some Bangladeshi exporters have built

➔ CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

← CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

up with very large buyers (such as Wal-Mart, Levis, Nike, etc.), which do not intend to leave the country overnight. These buyers do not intend only to use China as a supplier in the future, weary of becoming dependent on just one country

THE CHRONIC DISEASES OF BANGLADESH ... AND ITS WORKERS

The fact remains that despite these plus points, Bangladesh has some severe handicaps within a liberalised market. One major obstacle, as mentioned above, is the fact that it does not indigenously produce on its all of the raw materials needed for making clothes. A lot of time (and money) is therefore lost importing these materials, which is a considerable disadvantage since the delivery deadlines set by major clothes buyers are getting shorter and shorter.

“Bangladesh’s government has not raised the minimum wage since 1994, does not enforce its labour legislation and has not permitted trade unions in its Export Processing Zones. But, rather than protecting the country’s industrial base the absence of decent work has undermined it and made development unsustainable”.

Neil Kearney, General Secretary of the International Textile, Garment & Leather Workers’ Federation

The infrastructure of Bangladesh’s ports has also come under criticism, as have the corruption and labour disputes that are common there. The electricity supply is frequently cut off and therefore factories need to buy generators. Furthermore, the bad working conditions and poor wages in many companies also cause serious problems. In 2003, a Bangladeshi institute carried out a study (see page 4) of over 800 textile workers and discovered that 42% of women workers and 24% of their male counterparts are suffering from chronic diseases. Their weakened state of health is creating major losses of productivity but this has not necessarily prompted company bosses to make radical improvements to the situation.

Ranah George Abraham, Levi Strauss’ main buyer in Bangladesh, out-

lines the strategy which big label firms will be adopting from 2005. “As far as we are concerned, we are not planning to reduce our orders in Bangladesh, on the contrary in fact. The big companies are not just looking for the cheapest producers but also partners who can offer them ‘solutions’ from A to Z. At the moment we can order whatever we want from them, but in future we might, for example, ask them to cover transport to the countries where we sell the goods, and then to our warehouses. So we shall need partners able to meet our needs quickly and efficiently. Not many companies are able to work like that in Bangladesh at the moment, but the best ones have understood what is needed. Up till now they simply added staff when a task was getting a bit too complicated and they can afford to do that since the wages are so low. Some firms have understood that they will need to change if they want to survive in a quota-less environment where efficiency will be the key to success”.

SOCIAL TENSION IN PROSPECT

A process of natural selection looms in Bangladesh from 2005: well-organised companies that have invested in new machines and treat their employees properly and well have a good chance of keeping their orders, and therefore their jobs. At the bottom end of the scale, those inefficient factories that only survived thanks to the quotas are likely to experience hard times sooner or later, which could lead to major social unrest.

“It’s a dangerous situation because most workers have no hope of finding another job or, in some cases, of return-

ing to the agricultural regions they came from. It’s also dangerous because they have no savings or home of their own (since wages are too low), and they are unlikely to receive their final salary, final overtime hours and severance pay, since the companies will be bankrupted”, warns Rob Wayss, an ACILS (American Center for International Labour Solidarity) representative in Bangladesh. According to some sources, it would seem that about 50 people committed suicide this year in the district of Gazipur after suddenly losing their job in the garment industry.

Those Bangladeshi workers who lose their jobs will, of course, be able to blame the unfair competition from China: in addition to the economies of scale allowed by the sheer size of the country, Chinese exporters are even freer than their Bangladeshi counterparts to exploit their labour force and plus they receive certain government subsidies. Bangladeshi workers may also blame the country’s leaders’ lack of vision of: the date for ending the ATC (1 January 2005) has been fixed for ten years now, but the government and many employers have done nothing to adapt to the new circumstances. It is only in recent months that the government has become seriously worried about the 2005 deadline, and organized lots of meetings and a number of tentative measures aimed at damage limitation. There is still no social security or unemployment benefit available to any workers who lose their jobs, and the lack of diversification of exports remains a problem. ●

SAMUEL GRUMIAU

The ending of quotas will benefit China

The Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC), which replaced the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA), consists of a system of export quotas on clothes allocated by developed countries to developing countries. The quotas for highly competitive exporters like South Korea have tended to be limited whilst those allotted to less competitive exporters, such as Bangladesh or Cambodia, have been high. This system has encouraged clothing exporters to move throughout the world to find the available quotas, helping create millions of jobs in countries which

formerly only had a small clothing export industry or none at all. There is much anxiety in the countries that currently enjoy high quotas: faced with competition from countries like China, which has almost unlimited production capacity and a cheap and exploited supply of labour, it is not clear whether from 2005 onwards, the high-quota countries will manage to retain the level of investment currently enjoyed in their clothing industry and associated jobs. Concerned by the huge social costs that might arise in many countries from the ending of the ATC, the ICFTU will shortly be publishing a study on this issue.

Encouraging employers to respect labour legislation

Having helped the clotheswear exporters to campaign against child labour, the ILO set up a project to improve working conditions in these firms. The employers' association is fully involved in this project, but the unions are not. The ILO would like to get employers to understand that improving working conditions can also be a way of improving productivity.

Until recently child labour was very common in the Bangladeshi clothes factories producing goods for export market. The resulting international pressure forced the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) into signing an agreement with the ILO and UNICEF aimed at removing all children under 14 from its factories and placing them in schools run by local NGOs. The BGMEA insisted that the unions be excluded from the agreement, which was signed on 4 July 1995. The agreement provided for unannounced monitoring visits to factories affiliated to the BGMEA, in order to check if there were any workers under age 14. These teams were composed of ILO, government and BGMEA representatives (1).

The implementation of this agreement has led to a drastic drop in the number of children working in BGMEA factories. In fact, there are hardly any left now. Heartened by this achievement, the ILO decided to extend its monitoring to include all facets of labour standards included in Bangladesh's legislation and in the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. It has trained the members of the monitoring teams on all of these issues, in addition to child labour. Each team has 4 members, consisting of 2 representatives from the ILO (including one woman), 1 representative from the BGMEA and 1 from the Labour Ministry. At present, there are 12 such teams. The companies affiliated to the BGMEA are monitored on a voluntary basis and visits are announced in advance since top managers need to be there. It is now 2 years since the project began and 232 firms (of the 3,500 or so BGMEA members) have been visited by the monitoring teams. The ILO would like another 200 to be inspected before the end of 2004. 40% of the BGMEA member organisations have volunteered to take part in the project.

This voluntary monitoring system is a lengthy process. Shengjie Li, the project's chief technical adviser, explains how it works: "To begin with, a team visits one of the companies with a list of items to be checked, its members note down everything they see and enter their comments in a database which is



Improving workers' conditions also improves productivity. (Photo: S.G.)

later used to work out a programme aimed at making improvements. One week later they return to the company, meet the top management and the staff representatives (if there are any) and point out the various problems they have identified, their implications and measures to be taken to solve them. They try to agree on an improvement plan for the workplace that all parties sign. Throughout the next week, the top managers attend a seminar where we train them on a whole range of issues, from occupational health and safety to social dialogue and working conditions, etc. One month later, the monitoring team returns to the factory to check what changes have been made. Where aspects of the plan have not been improved they are discussed with the management and then they return 2/3 months later to make new checks, and once more if still necessary. During each visit, the team members interview employers and workers separately". The BGMEA and the ILO have reached an

agreement that the latter should not publish any matters mentioned in its plans and reports.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE UNIONS?

On the workers' side, there is definite appreciation of this ILO project, though it would have been preferable for the Bangladeshi labour inspectorate to do the monitoring work. However there is criticism of the fact that one key player is excluded from the procedure: the unions! As in the project against child labour, the ILO is obviously torn between its desire to operate on a tripartite basis and the Bangladeshi employers' opposition to any proper trade union involvement. "We are currently considering how to integrate union representatives in our monitoring teams", stresses Shengjie Li. "It is important, above all, that union leaders are fully aware of all the matters addressed in these checks. So we are going to organise training courses for them, covering the same issues as those for employers. We hope to do this over the next three months".

The ILO has been receiving a growing number of requests to attend the seminars from BGMEA member companies, particularly those whose top managers have already been trained and would now like their middle managers to attend the courses. More informal training has also been organised for workers and middle managers, at their bosses' request, in about 50 factories. "More and more company bosses are realising that improving labour standards increases their firms' productivity", observes Shengjie Li. "For example, if you provide drinking water to your employees, as the law requires, they will be healthier and ask for less sick leave, which can only be good for the company". In the longer term the ILO hopes that firms whose managers have attended seminars will be able to organise their own courses and no longer need the project. The project should last at least until 2005, thanks to large contributions from the US government (\$1.5 million USD) and a promised contribution from the BGMEA (600,000 dollars). ●

(1) For more information about this, please see the relevant 'Trade Union World' article from 2001 at the following address: <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Iindex=991212385&Language=FR>

Work till you drop

Poor wages and harsh working conditions are causing distress and chronic diseases amongst garment workers, 80% of whom are young women.

The garment industry is the lifeblood of the Bangladeshi economy, but keeps its workforce on poverty wages: the minimum wage of 930 takas (16 dollars) has not risen since 1994. And it is not possible in Bangladesh – any more than it is in any other country – to live decently on such a wage. So workers try to do overtime, but employers often cheat them on their hours, preferring to pay them fixed sums lower than the 100% increase provided for in the law. The repression of trade unions only makes such exploitation easier.

Aysha, 32 years old, works in a firm that produces clothes for well-known brands like Levis and Dockers. She does not complain about rather about her working conditions but the lack of union rights: “Some 200 of us, all women, are members of a union but we don’t dare to get it officially registered as we are very scared of being sacked or attacked by gangs hired by the employers. A union would be very useful though, since our overtime hours are only paid 75% more than normal hours though it should be 100% according to the law. No-one dares try any collective

action to complain about this”.

In several firms, the women workers explain that they would no longer get any overtime if they became union activists. Some women also whisper that male superiors “make it easier” for them to get overtime in return for sexual favours. “The victims are unlikely to complain openly about such abuses”, explains Nazma Akter, General Secretary of the BIGUF: Bangladesh is a country that has kept conservative customs and if a woman complains of sexual harassment the men will spread false rumours about her and she will get the reputation of being a prostitute. Nobody will marry her and even her parents might reject her”. Such forms of abuse are far less common in the rare factories where a union has managed to gain official registration.

EXPLOITATION KEEPS PRICES DOWN AND HELPS IMPOSSIBLE DEADLINES TO BE MET

The big brands that buy from countries like Bangladesh are keen to highlight the codes of conduct they impose on their suppliers, but the delivery deadlines and prices they set make it virtually impossible to respect these codes. Kulsum, who is 20, began working at 13 years of age in clothes factories for wages ranging from 600 takas (10 dollars) at the start to 1,700 takas (28 dollars) when she had gained some experience. “The main buyer of our products was always unhappy with our de-

livery deadlines, so our boss forced us all to work two hours’ overtime. Those hours were not paid at a higher rate than normal hours and we were not offered any food or drink though we stayed at work till 10 pm or midnight. The buyer had insisted that our firm only work 6 days a week, but this was not always respected”.

The wages of textile workers mean they have dreadful living conditions: “Because of the poor wages I earn I can’t find any good accommodation”, continues Kulsum. “So I live in a building where the sanitary and kitchen facilities are shared by all the tenants. There’s a long queue for both every morning and I have to get up at 5, or sometimes even 3 am, in order to have a wash and cook something, as I then have to eat (we are not allowed to take any food to the factory, where work starts at 8 am), go and fetch some drinking water and do a little housework, etc. It’s very hard getting up so early when you’ve worked all the previous day till 10 pm or midnight, especially when the weekly rest day is cancelled and you don’t have enough time or money to eat properly”.

SERIOUS HEALTH PROBLEMS

Like millions of Bangladeshi workers Kulsum long gave up hope of having any recreational activities alongside her work. She is condemned to work every day until she is exhausted. The impossibility of getting any proper rest or paying for decent food or medical care has left a large proportion of workers weak and ill (thereby reducing their productivity), as shown in a survey carried out last year by a Bangladeshi institute (1): 45% of the women and 36% of the men interviewed said they felt physically weak, and 3% of the women and 4% of the men had fainted in the month prior to the interview. Over one third of the women workers were suffering from chronic illnesses such as gastro-intestinal infections, urinary or blood pressure problems, anaemia, and so on. Most of them had not had these illnesses before working in the garment industry.

The ill-health of a large section of garment workers has led to a large turnover of staff: on average a worker only stays 4 years with one employer. The employer therefore has to take on and train another worker to replace the one he could have kept if only he had provided better working conditions. Is this how Bangladesh’s employers are hoping to compete after 2005? ●

Trafficking to India

The BNWLA (1) is a Bangladeshi NGO that helps a great number of exploited or abused women. Its many activities include campaigning against the trafficking of thousands of Bangladeshi women to foreign countries. Salma Ali, Director of the BNWLA, stresses that many of them had hoped to work in the garment industry. “Our refuge takes in young women who were repatriated to Bangladesh after being trafficked to India, the Middle East and Pakistan for prostitution or other forms of exploitation. 80% of our residents say they left the poverty of their villages for Dhaka, the capital, where they hoped to find a job in the garment

industry or domestic work. In the capital they made some ‘bad acquaintances’, mostly in the unsuitable lodgings where they had to stay whilst hoping to find work in a factory. They are promised better lives in these countries and unwittingly find themselves trapped by a well-organised network that ends up forcing them into prostitution. These networks sell the girls for between 5 and 20,000 Indian rupees (110 to 440 dollars) in the host countries. They are completely lost in these countries as they don’t understand the languages and have no idea whom to ask for help. Only a minority are rescued by NGOs or the police”.

(1) Bangladesh National Women Lawyers’ Association - website: www.bnwla.org

(1) “Health Status of the Garment Workers in Bangladesh”, by Pratima Paul-Majumder, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies. Survey carried out in 2003 with over 800 textile workers.

A skilfully maintained anti-union environment

Scarcely 3% of Bangladeshi workers are members of unions. The serious repression of union activities and political involvement of many trade unions means that the vast majority of Bangladeshi workers are left exposed and with no protection.

Bangladesh's trade unions have a very bad image amongst the country's employers, who view them all as being manipulated by political parties and serving their own interests rather than those of the workers. As a result, they are very unwelcome in workplaces, for example in factories. Indeed, a number of Bangladeshi unions are much closer to the political elite than to the workers and are prepared to manipulate their members to please one party or other. However, it would be unfair to categorise all Bangladeshi unions as displaying these traits. A number of outstanding Bangladeshi union leaders dedicate their lives to defending workers, but also suffer from the public image of the union movement, which the employers are only happy to propagate.

BOSSSES "UNDER THREAT"?

As in many countries, employers in the export processing zones (EPZs) are particularly opposed to talking of trade unions at all, despite the fact that working conditions and wages in the EPZs are better than elsewhere. The bosses claim that they want to respect workers' rights and hold discussions with them in "committees for workers' wellbeing" that have no links to external trade unions. Their virulent anti-union rhetoric sometimes borders on the ridiculous. "We are in danger as our investment amounting to around 1 billion US dollars would be ruined, and 130,000 local workers may lose jobs in consequence of trade unionism in the EPZs", said Kihak Sung, the Director of Youngone, one of the largest enterprises in the Bangladeshi EPZs, last December. Such exaggerated statements are part of the propaganda used by employers to try to dissuade the government from allowing unions into EPZs. The government simultaneously faces pressure from the international trade union movement, including the ITGLWF, which has filed an official complaint with the ILO (1), and from the United States, which is threatening to remove Bangladesh's trade benefits under the Generalised System of Preferences if the anti-union restrictions in EPZs are not lifted.

Workers employed outside the zones are no better off. Of the more than



Nurul Islam has already been arrested ten times for his trade union activities. (Photo: S.G.)

3,000 textile firms that produce for the export market, barely 127 have an officially registered union and less than a dozen employers have serious negotiations with unions. Workers are frequently victims of sackings, beatings or false police accusations of militancy being present in their unions. Nurul Islam, who is 45 and has four children, is the General Secretary of the textile union UFGW (United Federation of Garment Workers, an ITLWGF affiliate) and the coordinator of the health centre set up by three unions in the zone of Keranigonj (see page 6). He has already been arrested a dozen times, the last being on 1 March this year. "I was in my union's office, located in the same building as a local branch of a political party. The police arrived in large numbers and arrested everyone in the building. They threw us into prison and I was wrongly accused of holding explosives. I spent 11 days in a 4-person cell cramped together with 15 other people. The sanitary conditions were horrible".

MURDERS AND HARASSMENT

Workers who try to set up a union are not protected prior to its registration and are often subjected to harassment from their employers, which, with police support, sometimes takes violent

forms. The names of workers seeking to register a union are often passed on to employers, who quickly try to transfer or sack them, above all in the textile sector. Even once a union has been registered, workers suspected of activism are frequently subjected to harassment. "We managed to set up 18 unions in textile firms in Mirpur, a zone in the Dhaka area", explains G.M. Rabbani, Vice-President of the BMSF (2), affiliated to the ICFTU. "In each case, the employee who had been most active in creating the union was sacked. Legal procedures are in place for reinstating them, but there is always a waste of time and energy. Employers continually use a range of annoying measures to discourage us, such as suspension of our wages for a month or two. They know they will lose in the courts but all these measures are aimed at discouraging activists".

It is not rare for anti-unionism to lead to murder. On 7 May 2004, Ashanullah Master, President of the Jatio Sramik League (JSL, an ICFTU affiliate), was shot during a demonstration. In early 2003, Aminul Islam Chowdhury, President of the Bhola district committee of the JSL, died whilst being held for questioning in a military barracks. Bad management of protest movements can also lead to dramatic events, as in the case of the company Pantex Garments Ltd. On 3 November, the police were given the order to arrest the workers' representative during a demonstration by workers about working conditions. That sparked a feeling of discontent which spread beyond the factory to various other industrial zones. In addition to the police officers, five brigades of paramilitaries were called onto the scene to control the demonstrators. One worker was killed and a further 200 were injured.

Respect for workers' rights could be beneficial outcome when the clothing industry is liberalised in January 2005. Unfortunately, though, Bangladesh's employers and government are yet to fully appreciate this. ●

- (1) More information available on the website of the ITGLWF (International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation): www.itglwf.org
(2) Bangladesh Mukto Sramik Federation.

School and health centre help unions establish their credentials

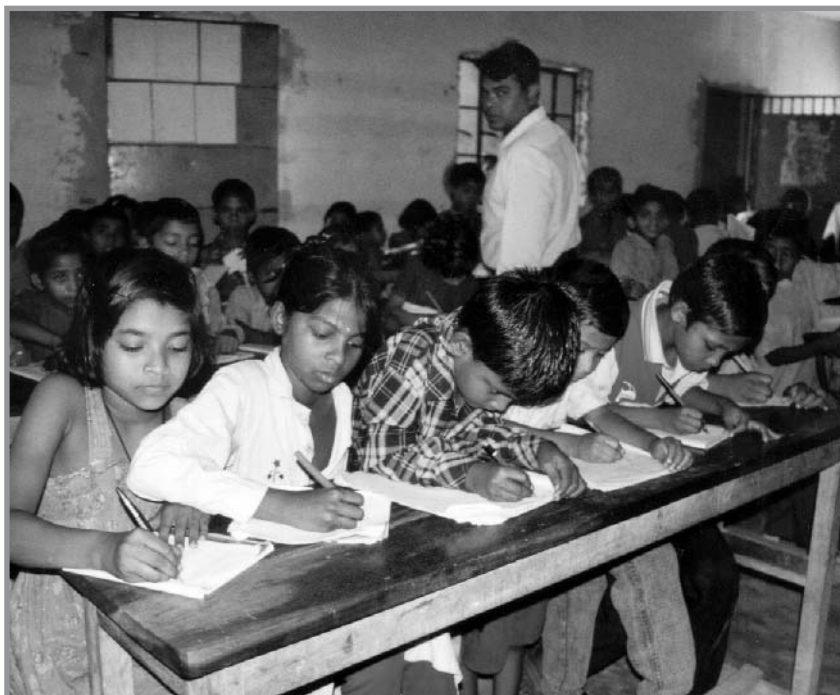
Several trade unions have set up social projects in an industrial estate in Dhaka that are benefiting both workers and employers. These projects have helped initiate a dialogue with the employers, the first results of which are now being enjoyed by the workers.

The Keranigonj industrial estate on the outskirts of Dhaka is full of hundreds of small textile workshops that only supply the Bangladeshi market. The working conditions are very tough, with crowded and airless rooms, dust or mud depending on the season, excessive working hours and a lack of holidays for example. The bosses of the workshops in this maze of alleyways have little to fear from labour inspectors (who are too few in number, badly equipped and badly paid) or foreign observers, who are mainly interested in the conditions of workers in exporting companies. Almost all the workshops are very small businesses; the company bosses only employ between 5 and 15 workers and are just as poor as their staff.

Organising workers in such an estate is a difficult challenge for the Bangladeshi unions, given the employers' traditional aversion to the creation of any trade union (exacerbated by the reputation local unions have of being politicised) and also because workers' lack of information about trade unions and general poor level of education. Violence has already broken out on several occasions and trade unionists have even been killed. The first reflex of employers is to sack any workers wishing to form a union. So instead of taking action that might provoke yet more violence, many textile unions have chosen another approach, setting up projects in Keranigonj that can benefit both workers and employers.

GAINING THE EMPLOYERS' TRUST

"When we began our work in Keranigonj, we didn't mention any trade union demands," explains Kamrul Anam, President of the BTGWL (Bangladesh Textile and Garments Workers League, affiliated to the Global Union Federation, ITGLWF). "We met the employers' association in this industrial estate and asked them what kind of problems they were facing. Our aim was to start off by trying to understand their problems and then talk to them about the issues that concern us most, such as child labour. We told them we would like to set up some social activities, rather like an NGO, and that these could benefit both workers and employers. One of the first things



600 children receive basic schooling thanks to a textile union. (Photo: S.G.)

we wanted was to provide training to both groups. We suggested organising basic adult education courses in Keranigonj, e.g. reading and writing. The employers' association gave its agreement, and also agreed to our proposal to set up a health centre and then a school. It was not till one or two years later, once those projects had been completed, that we set up a union and registered it properly with the authorities. First we needed to establish a relationship with the employers' association built on trust".

One of the first projects was a small health centre in the middle of Keranigonj, opened and run by 3 trade unions with financial assistance from the FNV, a Dutch affiliate of the ICFTU (1). Workers in the union and employers can receive treatment there at a very reasonable price, which prevents them having to travel several kilometres to see a doctor. Only those managers who do not employ children under 14 may use the health centre. Malaria, hepatitis and scabies are common illnesses amongst the patients, as are occupational accidents (such as cuts, needles

stuck in fingers and so on), which have risen owing to lack of safety in the workshops.

"The number of patients rises considerably during the hot season, as the workers generally have no access to fresh air. So then we get more cases of dysentery, diarrhoea, and so on," explains Dr Mafruha who works at the centre. "Women workers, who are in a minority in Keranigonj, often ask us for help with specific problems; as there are virtually no toilets in the workshop area, they hold on for as long as possible, which leads to urinary problems. Generally they are scared to mention these in the early stages and only come when their problems have worsened". The centre also offers a lot of advice on health and safety at work, hygiene and prevention of illnesses, such as AIDS (2).

A SCHOOL TO COMBAT THE PROBLEM CHILD LABOUR

Child labour is very widespread in the workshops of Keranigonj. The textile union BTGWL wants to set up projects to combat such abuses, in line with

the global trade union campaign against child labour, however there are major obstacles in transforming good intentions into concrete action. "If children are working it's because of the extreme poverty and low wages of their parents. The wages are no higher than 2 or 3,000 takas per month (i.e. 33 to 50 dollars) in textile workshops, even for 12 to 14 hours' work a day 7 days a week", explains Karmul Anam, President of the BTGWL. "If these children were removed from the workshops where would they go? We decided in 2001 to set up a school in the middle of Keranigonj, and in three other areas in Dhaka. Child workers are welcome there, as are the children of workers who are members of the BTGWL. The schools are free of charge and we provide the basic teaching materials. We have reached an agreement with certain employers, who 'release' children to attend school for a few hours a day".

Roughly 600 children attend the 4 schools of the BTGWL, including about 300 in Keranigonj. Four teachers are employed in the school in the region. The children are divided into two groups: one for those in the first and second years of primary school, attending lessons from 8 to 10am, and the sec-

ond group is composed of children in their third to fifth years, in school from 10.30am to 2pm. "For the time being we cannot afford to provide schooling to children above the fifth year of primary school" states Ashim Kumar Das, one of the teachers. "Many work full-time after that age and some will join a state school. We try to help them with these registrations, but the schools are very expensive compared to the parents' salaries: the registration itself costs 650 takas (10 dollars) but then you need 1,050 takas for the uniform, not to mention the additional monthly costs". Up till now, the BTGWL schools have been able to take in all the children who wanted to go to them, but the union is worried that it will not be able to meet the future demand as more and more people hear about these schools.

SHORTAGE OF TOILETS AND DRINKING WATER

Keranigonj is still a squalid place in terms of hygiene and living and working conditions, though things have improved slightly since the start of the millennium when unions and employers started to cooperate. "Before then there was not even any electric lighting for night work", recalls Kamrul Anam.

"At least we have that now, though it could be improved, and it's thanks to pressure from organised workers in the union. We have also managed to get a few toilets and drinking water facilities installed in Keranigonj. These improvements are nothing like enough, from our point of view, but they are better than nothing".

The workers are gradually becoming aware of their rights and of the dangers they face in the workshops. Thanks to the constructive approach of some textile unions, they are now able to begin a dialogue with employers. That dialogue is far from ideal and there is still considerable reluctance on the part of employers to use their money to invest in the well-being of their workers, but a large number of them are now beginning to see that this is in their own interests. This in itself is a remarkable achievement. ●

- (1) The FNV (Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging) has provided 65,000 euros per year, via the ITGLWF, to fund this health centre.
(2) For more information about this health centre please see the article published in Trade Union World in March 2001: <http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991212386&Language=FR>

A beacon of hope for hundreds of children in Keranigonj

A short visit to the school set up by the BTGWL in Keranigonj is enough to see what a lifeline it represents for the hundreds of children who otherwise would probably never attend a school. The teaching conditions are rudimentary, with three groups of children of different levels in the same large room, but these few hours of schooling give them hope of a better life. "If we didn't have this school, I don't know if I would have had the chance to go to school", explains Inran Bapari, 10 years old. "I have five brothers and one sister, three of whom are in the same school and three of whom work. My father is a baby taxi driver (1) and earns just enough so that I don't have to work after school, but can go and play and study. I'm in the second year at the moment and will do all I can to succeed; I'd like to be a lawyer when I'm older". Not



Will Shevaci, a 9 year-old, fulfil her dream of becoming a doctor?
(Photo: S.G.)

all the pupils at the school have the same freedom, however. Robin, an 11-year old, has to help his father after school. "He has a small clothes workshop and I help him after school by bringing him materials or food and sometimes doing some sewing".

The schoolteachers are not volunteers but have to accept modest wages given their qualifications since the union has a very tight budget. Ashim Kumar Das, 25 years old, is one of them. He is studying physics at a university in Dhaka and his studies cost him 4,000 takas (about 66 dollars) a month; half of that is covered by his teacher's salary at the school in Keranigonj, but the other half is on loan. Ashim puts all his energy into the few hours he teaches to some 200 pupils. "I'm pleased to have teachers like that", explains Shevaci, a 9-year old pupil in the fourth year. "They really do their best to help us. My father works in a textile workshop. My dream would be to become a doctor, so I could look after all the members of my family and all my neighbours who are sick".

- (1) Small three-wheeled taxi similar to the famous 'tuk tuks' in Thailand.

Rickshaw drivers are getting organised

Though rickshaws are one of the most popular forms of transport in Bangladesh their drivers are looked down upon in society. They are trying to improve their rights by forming a union.

This is one of the toughest jobs in the world. Every day in Dhaka, 500,000 drivers of non-motorised rickshaws (1) pedal through the tremendous pollution, heat, congested traffic and continual beeping of vehicles. Under grey skies or tropical rainstorms, they carve out routes for their passengers through the Bangladeshi capital, zigzagging between motorised rickshaws, cars, buses and lorries, which show no pity to these "traffic slowers". On average, 2% of these drivers have an accident every day, some of which are minor (e.g. small collisions with motorised rickshaws), whilst others are more serious (e.g. overturned or destroyed rickshaws) or even fatal.

Most of these drivers come from rural parts of Bangladesh, having left their homes to "try their luck" in Dhaka, where life is supposed to be better than in the countryside. They live in the capital's slum areas and often share a "room" in groups of ten or twenty for 1,000 takas (roughly 16 dollars) per month. They have formed a union, the Jatio Rickshaw Sramik League (affiliated to the International Transport Workers' Federation). The drivers pay 10 takas to join and thereafter pay 5 takas a month to remain members. The union is able to offer its beneficial links to doctors and the payment of 3 doctors' bills per member costing a maximum of 10,000 takas (160 dollars) for the three visits. In Dhaka alone, 100,000 people have joined the union.

Assistance with medical fees is a valuable benefit, since illnesses such as asthma and tuberculosis, as well as those resulting from malnutrition are very common amongst the drivers of pedal-drawn rickshaws. They are very poor and would have no hope of getting proper care without that assistance. Azakar Ali, director of the Jatio Rickshaw Sramik League (JRSL), knows his members' situation very well, since he did the job himself for 21 years: "they rent an old rickshaw for 40 takas (about 60 US cents) per day, whilst the new machines, which have fewer mechanical problems, cost 70 takas per day to rent. They rarely earn more than 80 or 100 takas per day, which leaves them very small profits for buying food, paying rent and so on. It's very tough and



One of the toughest though most despised jobs. (Photo: S.G.)

as there are many people wanting to drive the rickshaws available for hire, many have to share the cost with others, with the first having it from 6am to 2pm and the second from 2pm till midnight, for instance".

LICENCES- REDUCING THE LEVEL OF POLICE HARASSMENT

The JRSL has been trying to stand up for its members' interests with the authorities, particularly since the city of Dhaka wants to ban pedal-drawn rickshaws from some main roads in order to ease the traffic. It is also trying to get the authorities to increase the number of licences granted to rickshaw drivers: "at the moment the number is limited to 80,000 though there are 500,000 drivers," states Azakar Ali. "A licence costs 250 takas per year, but the authorities have not granted any licences for over 10 years now, in the hope of reducing traffic congestion". Some close relations of deceased drivers have sold licences in order to earn a little cash. With a licence you have a chance of escaping police harassment, since the police are quick to confiscate the rickshaws of drivers without that document or to ask them for large bribes. Pedal-drawn rickshaw drivers are real pariahs in Bangladeshi towns and are regularly subjected to hefty, arbitrary beatings by the police's batons, with no chance of legal recourse.

Given the physical strength needed to pedal the rickshaws, it is unusual to see drivers under 18 years old, though there is no upper age limit for drivers. Since it is virtually impossible to save any money, some Dhaka drivers carry

on pedalling till they die. Every day, old men wear out their lungs driving their passengers through the pollution and crazy traffic of the capital city. "Most pedal-drawn rickshaw drivers dream of renting a motorised rickshaw, owing their own rickshaw (though that costs 7,500 takas), or else finding another job", observes Azakar Ali. "But since they do not have enough money to eat properly their projects generally remain a dream. So they carry on pedalling, despite the humiliation of being looked down on by Bangladeshis in spite of the toughness of their jobs. There is no contentment to be had from such work. When I received the few takas from my passengers I had to rest a bit before setting off again. You are sweating, exhausted and demoralised by the pittance you are paid. I felt really bad about earning so little after making such an effort". ●

(1) Passenger vehicle pulled by a bicycle.

Publisher responsible at law: Guy Ryder, General secretary

ICFTU

5 Bld du Roi Albert II, Bte 1,
1210-Brussels, Belgium
Tel: ...+32 2 2240211, Fax: ...+32 2 2015815
E-Mail: press@icftu.org
Web Site: <http://www.icftu.org>

Report and photos: Samuel Grumiau

Editor in Chief: Natacha David