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Sri Lanka: unions overcome barriers to organising in export processing zones

The number of unions recognised in Sri Lanka's zones is still quite low, but the inroads made so far offer a ray of hope. What strategies are trade unions deploying to organise the export processing zones, well-known bastions of anti-unionism in Sri Lanka, as elsewhere in the world? What obstacles lie in their way? What are the concrete results for the men and women working in the zones, all too often under deplorable working and living conditions?

Inside reports from Sri Lanka's export processing zones.



Specific trade union strategies for export processing zones

What can be done to adapt trade union strategies to the young, female profile of EPZ workers whilst fighting against the traditional opposition of employers and the authorities? With perseverance and flexibility, leisure and training centres located close to the zones have prepared the ground for their unionisation.

Of the many export processing zones (EPZ) in Sri Lanka, the three largest are Katunayake and Biyagama, on the outskirts of Colombo, and Koggala, not far from Galle, the main city on the country's southern coast. Around 100,000 workers are employed in these zones. Between 80 and 85% of them are women. Most of the companies produce textiles, although there are others producing toys, diamonds, tobacco, electronics, tires, etc. The fiscal incentives offered in these zones have been expanded to export-producing companies outside the zones, but investors basing their operations on the inside enjoy other benefits: a guaranteed supply of electricity and water, easier access to telecommunications services, a one-stop centre for administrative procedures, and the presence of barriers around the zones, preventing the access of any unauthorised persons.

Sri Lanka has ratified the main ILO conventions guaranteeing freedom of association, it has a democratic system of government, its labour legislation is applicable across the board and makes no distinction between companies inside or outside the zones. The foundations supporting respect for workers rights are therefore solid, and yet we have had to wait until the beginning of this millennium to see the first unions achieve recognition inside export processing zones, despite their dating back to the late seventies.

Numerous obstacles have been placed (and continue to be placed) in the way of trade unionists. One very concrete obstacle is the barrier that surrounds the zones, making them look like military bases. The guards located at the entrances to the zones are very strict - they have even been known to refuse access to work inspectors. Trade union officials can only enter the zone if their union is recognised by one of



the companies. Consequently, union organisers have to meet workers at the exit, on their way home, or at the boarding houses where most of the workers live (see page 6).

CHECK-OFF DIFFICULTIES

Given the working hours, such meetings generally have to be held in the evenings, but the zones are located on the outskirts of Colombo, a considerable distance from the main trade unions' headquarters. This constraint goes some way towards explaining why many Sri Lankan trade unions show little interest in organising in the export processing zones. Another setback is the difficulty in convincing employers to apply the check-off system (the automatic deduction of union dues from the salaries of unionised workers), meaning that trade union representatives have to go from worker to worker to ask for their dues, which requires a great deal of time and energy. In addition, the nature of the workforce, which is essentially young and female, poses another challenge for traditional trade unions (see page 6).

The BOI (1) is the authority in charge of managing the EPZs. It has long done everything in its power to avoid the formation of trade unions in the zones, using the politicisation of some Sri Lankan trade unions as a pretext. The BOI has tried to encourage, rather, the creation of workers councils, bodies which are elected by the workers but have no members and are not accountable to their electors. In most cases, the representatives elected onto these councils have no real bargaining power, nor are they given the training required to represent the workers effectively. In short, they are of little use. *"The workers' councils are often set up in a rush, when the employees see that the workers are trying to form a real union,"* says Leon Joseph, general secretary of Progress Union, the most active trade unions in the zones. After many years of campaigning by the international

trade union movement and the intervention of the ILO, the BOI has finally agreed to modify the guidelines given to EPZ employers: the workers' council can only legitimately represent the workers when there is no recognised trade union.

EMPLOYERS IN LEAGUE WITH THE POLICE AND THUGS

The BOI's change of attitude has done little to facilitate the task of trade unions trying to organise in the zones. The situation in practice remains unchanged: workers deciding to join a union still risk being discriminated against or dismissed (see page 4). These anti-union practices are punishable by law, but the legal procedures required to obtain justice in such cases are long and convoluted. In some instances, employers even resort to violence to fight against the unions by paying thugs to threaten or beat the members. Likewise, police officers are also given a little pocket money to visit the workers' homes, ask them questions about their trade union activities, and press them to leave the union, etc.

Employees also exploit the negative image held by a large section of the Sri Lankan population. Trade unions are often seen as organisations that are too close to certain political parties, the media often only talks about them when there is a strike disrupting the lives of the general public (such as stoppages organised by public transport, port or petrol station workers). *"EPZ companies sometimes use this negative image to write to the parents of workers who want to become union members or have their union recognised,"* explains Leon Joseph. *"They tell them that their children are bad elements who want to plunge their factories into bankruptcy, hoping that the parents will put pressure on their children to leave the trade union."*

FRIENDSHIP HOUSES

Three trade unions are determined to overcome these difficulties in organ-

ising EPZ workers. All three of them are linked, to a lesser or greater extent, to the small centres created outside but not far from the EPZs, close to where the workers live. Aside from advice linked to the world of work, the centres offer a whole host of services: an opportunity to watch television, to borrow books or magazines, and to carry out artistic activities, etc. The National Workers Congress (NWC), affiliated to the WCL, was among the first to create this type of centre, which it calls "Friendship Houses". "We call them that because the word "trade union" scares EPZ workers; but they are, in fact, trade unions," explains Mila Mortier, one of the leaders of the Friendship House in Katunayake, the country's largest zone, to the north of Colombo. "We started with a small group of activists who visited the boarding houses, where the women workers rent rooms in the homes of people living close to the zone. They told them about the services offered by the friendship houses, such as training on health and safety matters, information on sexually transmitted diseases, English classes, occupational training, advice regarding problems with employers or landlords, a library, dance groups, games, etc. The Katunayake Friendship House opens from 11 a.m. to 9 or 10 p.m., so that it can welcome the women who work the morning and evening shifts. We organise several training sessions a week."

The NWC is currently running three friendship houses located close to Sri Lanka's largest export processing zone. The women who frequent them are progressively encouraged to form a union within their companies. It can take many months. Lalitha Ranjani Dedduwa, the coordinator of the three Friendship Houses, explains the strategy: "Our first step is to find out about the economic health of the company, to make sure that we don't form a union in a factory that is about to close, as this would only strengthen the employers' argument that trade unions cause bankruptcy. If the company is healthy, we encourage the workers to disseminate the idea of defending their rights, and to eventually go about forming a union. The first activists within the company are very important, we provide them with training to boost their self-confidence and to learn how to tackle any negative reactions from their colleagues."

MAKING STEALTHY PROGRESS

The next step is to obtain recognition from the employer - the most difficult task. "According to Sri Lankan law, a trade union must be recognised as soon as it represents 40% of a factory's workforce," continues Lalitha Ranjani. "If an employer refuses, we can ask the Labour Ministry to organise a referendum among the workforce. The NWC uses the strategy of not asking for a referendum to be held until we have recruited at least 80% of the work-



Provide a convivial meeting place to help in organising workers.

ers in a company, to avoid any unpleasant surprises when it comes to the ballot. It can take a lot of time in factories employing thousands of workers: we have to advance stealthily, so as not to arouse the employers' suspicions and, above all, to give us time to train good leaders, which is no easy task when they have to work six or seven days a week until late in the evening and only have one day a week, at most, to devote to trade union training seminars."

The NWC achieved recognition from an EPZ company for the first time in 2003. "It was at Polytex, in the Koggala zone, but it took us three years between recruiting the first women and achieving recognition," explains Lalitha Ranjani. "Polytex was being pressured by other EPZ employers who feared that recognising the first trade union would precipitate attempts to create many others. The Labour Ministry had to intervene to ensure the holding of a referendum, in which 82% of the workers voted in favour of the union. The lesson we have drawn from this first success is that you have to be very determined and use the right strategy for organising EPZ workers. It's also useful to find out about the buyers and their codes of conduct, to contact organisations such as the Clean Clothes Campaign or international trade unions to obtain their support." Every month NWC organises a meeting of the trade union representatives from the factories in the various export processing zones, so they can share their experiences and acquire new skills, etc. Most of the leaders are women.

THE WORKERS' COUNCILS: A STEPPING STONE TOWARDS TRADE UNIONS

"We don't approve of the principle of workers' councils, but we decided to use

them as a basis for forming genuine trade unions in the long run," explains Anton Marcus, general secretary of the FTZWU (2), affiliated to the ITGLWF (3). "The employers often do everything they can to avoid this evolution, but with courage and perseverance we have had important successes. Such is the case, for example, at Jaqalanka, a factory in the Katunayake zone, which produces for Nike. Our members were attacked and received death threats when they tried to obtain union recognition. It took an international campaign and a complaint lodged to the ILO by the ICFTU and the ITGLWF to win our case and obtain union recognition from the company. The Clean Clothes Campaign gave us a lot of help with this case."

The FTZWU now has 14,000 members, 8000 of whom work in the EPZs. It is working in partnership with the Women's Centres, which are located close to the country's three largest zones and offer the same kind of services as the Friendship Houses. Around 1500 workers frequent these centres. Funded in the main by the New Zealand NGO CWS (4) these Women's Centres are independent of the FTZWU and take part in several citizen-based initiatives across Sri Lanka. "We're working with other NGOs to promote peace in the country, to help the women affected by the tsunami, and to celebrate International women's Day, etc.," notes Sriya Ahangama, the coordinator of the three centres. "We contact the FTZWU whenever there is a labour dispute, and also try to raise the women's awareness about defending their rights by organising training sessions once every two months on subjects such as labour legislation, women's rights, the promotion of women as trade union leaders,

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and so on."

A third trade union, the Progress Union, is also using a centre located not far from the Biyagama zone to attract workers and then try to unionise them. "We have called it the "Progress Centre", and it can welcome up to 150 people," explains its president, Palitha Atukorale. "Apart from the leisure activities and trade union training sessions, the workers can also use them for celebrations, such as birthday parties. We currently have 4200 members, 85% of whom work in the Biyagama zone."

Aside from these three trade unions, there is a fourth one that has managed to organise EPZ workers, but without making it a priority. It is the CMU (5), which is a member of several interna-

tional trade union federations, and whose general secretary is the untiring Bala Tampoe, who has occupied this post for 58 years. The CMU doesn't rely on any kind of workers' centre to recruit in the zones. With the help of the Japanese trade union RENGO, it has nonetheless managed to organise a branch at a subsidiary of the Japanese company Naigai Ltd., in the Katunayake zone. This breakthrough was made thanks to talks with the management of the parent company, in spite of fervent opposition from the management of its Sri Lankan subsidiary.

According to the Sri Lankan Labour Ministry, the rate of trade union membership in the export processing zones is around 12%, relative to 20% among the country's workforce at large. The four unions mentioned above have

therefore managed to make important inroads into what appeared, until now, to be fortresses when it came to trade union rights. The progress made has cost the jobs of hundreds of workers, unfairly dismissed for joining trade unions (see below). But it also offers the hope that tens of thousands of other workers will one day see their basic rights protected and their working conditions improved. ●

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- (1) Board of Investment
- (2) Free Trade Zone and General Services Workers Union
- (3) International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation
- (4) Christian World Service
- (5) Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers' Union

"It takes time to explain that we're not terrorists"

Hundreds of workers have lost their jobs and been blacklisted for forming trade unions in the export processing zones of Sri Lanka. Yet the dismissals, threats and insults are not discouraging trade unionists from asserting their rights.

It takes a lot of courage for activists to pioneer the formation of a trade union in an EPZ. If they fail and are punished with dismissal, finding another job in another factory proves very difficult. "Employers in EPZs exchange the names of workers who are receptive to trade unionism; they have a tacit agreement that no one will hire them," says Anton Marcus, general secretary of the FTZWU. Such was the case, for example, of the FTWZU trade union representatives sacked in 2003 by Workwear Lanka, in the Biyagama zone, after having informed the management that they wanted their union to be recognised, or the 255 workers from the same company, who were suspended after taking strike action in October 2005. "Some of us had found another job in the zone, but were asked to leave when the employer discovered that we had been fired from Workwear Lanka," confirms one of the workers, K.D. Popeyanthe.

In Biyagama, the Gartex garment factory also fights tooth and nail against any attempt to organise the workers. "We had serious doubts about our contributions to the provident fund," explains Padma Rajapaksa, treasurer of



Anton Marcus: "EPZ employers have a tacit agreement not to engage people known to be trade unionists".

the factory union, affiliated to the FTZWU. "We had noticed that the monies deducted from our wages were not being paid into the fund. We had started to recruit members in 2003, but the main activist, M.S. Mudunkotuwa, was soon fired after asking to check the identity of a person claiming to be from the Labour Ministry and who had come to discuss the contributions problem. Another trade union representative was fired in 2004, once again after having protested about the provident fund. We now have 150 members, out of the total workforce of 850 people, but there has been no letup in the pressure. The human resources manager regularly

asks me to give up my trade union activities, he says that trade unions are terrorist organisations, and gives example of extremist trade unions that have plunged companies into bankruptcy. It takes time to explain to everyone that we're not terrorists."

A SPORTS CLUB FOR MARKS & SPENCER

Gartex has been having some difficulties securing orders from buyers over recent months. "The factory is trying to attract orders from Marks & Spencer," confides Padma Rajapaksa. "I hope, given that this company is part of ETI (1), that we'll finally be able to organise the workers in peace. Our employer has set up a sports club for the workers, because he says that Marks & Spencer wants us to be happy. But for us, what would make us happy would be to have our contributions paid into the provident fund, not do sport in the factory club! The employer has also given us precise instructions on what we have to say to the Marks & Spencer's inspectors when they come to interview us."

The GP Garments factory, also located in the Biyagama zone, is another typical example of the general climate of anti-unionism. This factory belonged to a Belgian company, and supplied uniforms to the French army. When the employer learnt of the workers determination to unionise, he took radical measures. "The local management boasted of having set up a 82,000 euro fund aimed at dissolving the trade union organisation," explains Neil Kearney, general secretary of the ITGLWF. "As tensions escalated, the company brought special police forces into the factory in order to harass and

threaten union leaders. On seeing their demands to stop the abuse ignored, the trade union representatives organised a stoppage. The management then proceeded to lock out the workers and stopped their pay and benefits. When the company reopened its doors three weeks later, it still hadn't respected its commitment regarding the unpaid wages and benefits. The workers occupied the factory, but the company made wild and unfounded allegations of acts of terrorism and fired some 480 workers."

GP Garment then re-launched its operations with the remaining staff and other newly hired workers. At present, it is still refusing to reinstate the employees that were unfairly dismissed. "When we present ourselves in another factory to apply for a job vacancy, we are systematically rejected if the new employer discovers that we have worked at GP Garments," explains the president of the GP Garments union, affiliated to the FTZWU. ●

(1) Ethical Trade Initiative. ETI has set itself the task of comparing and improving the effectiveness of the different methods of auditing respect for its code of conduct: through the company itself, through the buyer or through a multistakeholder group. It has also distributed widely a brochure to explain its purpose, its code of conduct and the principles behind the audits. None of the companies involved in ETI in Sri Lanka currently have a union. For more information see its website: <http://www.ethicaltrade.org/>

When employers overcome their initial allergy to trade unions

At Sri Lankan companies following the path of social dialogue, the managers' unexpected satisfaction with relations with their trade union partners seems to have cured them of their allergic reaction to unions, often with productivity gains to boot.

The BOI (Board of Investment) and virtually all the employers in export processing zones have a negative image of trade unions. They portray them at best as organisations manipulated by political parties, and at worst as terrorist organisations capable of forcing a company into instant bankruptcy. This irrational and deceptive argument has been turned on its head in companies where employers have ended up recognising a union. Such is the case, for example, at the Polytex garment factory in the Koggala export processing zone. Polytex was the first EPZ company to sign a collective bargaining agreement with the union, namely the NWC (affiliated to the WCL). This breakthrough wasn't without a struggle: the union had to wait three years before being recognised, following the a referendum (see page 3).

"It's true that I tried to avoid this referendum, but it finally took place and the workers widely voted in favour of forming a union, so I gave in," explains Athula Abeywickrama, manager of Polytex Garment. "We now have good relations with the trade union in our factory, because it is headed by good leaders. Most of the workers don't have much of an education and are easily influenced by ringleaders, so it's very important that the trade union representatives be the kind of people we can talk to, people who understand how the economy works. That's the case with the NWC,

which trains its representatives well."

A collective bargaining agreement was signed, giving rise to an increase in certain benefits (allowances for transport or the death of a relative, etc).

"I'VE UNDERSTOOD THE POINT OF HAVING GENUINE TRADE UNION REPRESENTATIVES"

Also in the Koggala zone (near Galle, in the south of the country), the NWC has obtained recognition in the Koggala Manufacturing factory, which is part of the Star Garments group and employs 950 workers. The company produces above all for the Liz Claiborne brand. "I had a negative view of trade unions in the beginning," admits Priyanji Udugampola, the company's human resources manager. "I would by far have preferred to hold onto the workers' councils back then. But little by little, I understood the interest in having genuine trade union representatives: they can ask their Federation for advice, they learn how to dialogue, they understand what can be improved by always putting negotiation first."

But can good social dialogue be nothing but beneficial for Sri Lankan employers, faced with ever more ferocious international competition since the quota system came to an end with the expiry of the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing in January 2005? "Since the end of the quota system, our buyers have been insisting on ever shorter delivery deadlines. It's going to be difficult for us to withstand the competition from China and India as regards prices, which is why we're trying to increase the quality to hold onto our market share," explains Mr. Alwis, director of Koggala Manufacturing. The picture is the same at Polytex, "The prices we're paid by buyers have fallen by 30% since the end of the MFA," underlines Athula Abeywickrama. "We've had to increase productivity by improving our production techniques and investing in better technology, otherwise we wouldn't have

been able to withstand international competition."

"When we see the factory being cleaned from top to bottom, we know that an inspector or buyer will be coming the next day. We also receive instructions from the employer: to wear the uniform and the mask, to respect the quality standards set by one buyer or the other, etc."

Swarna Malkanthi, CMU trade union member at the Naigai factory (Katunayake zone)

Few Sri Lankan EPZ employers have agreed to be vaccinated against their allergy to trade unions, through good social dialogue, but those who have would seem, to their amazement, to be faring much better. Trellaborg, a tire factory in the Biyagama, is one fine example: "Dismissals of trade union leaders, threats to close down the factory, insults, ... we were spared nothing for the two years during which we were trying to get our union recognised by Trellaborg's management," recalls W. Somaratna, vice-president of the FTZWU union in the factory. "An international solidarity campaign helped us to finally obtain recognition in 2005. Since then we have secured the payment of union dues through the check-off system, a wage increase of 12% and other improvements. As regards the company's productivity, it has increased by 7%, and the percentage of production losses has dropped to zero, to our employer's great satisfaction." ●

Living indecently

Young, female, migrant and generally disinterested in long-term trade union action... export processing zone workers are not the easiest to organise. Yet the working conditions of these women workers merits a trade union struggle.

The very nature of the workforce within EPZs does nothing to help the task of trade unions trying to organise them. Between 80 and 85% of EPZ workers are women, mainly aged between 18 and 25. Most of them work for no longer than 5 or 6 years in the zones, the time it takes to save enough money to pay the dowry for their wedding. "According to the law, after working for a company for five years, employees are entitled to a bonus equal to half a month's pay for every year served," explains Palitha Atukorale, president of Progress Union. "They can also receive the money placed in the provident fund for their pensions. All that is generally enough to pay for their dowries. On top of that, they're generally exhausted after a few years. The normal working day is supposed to be eight hours but they often work 12 hours a day, sometimes seven days a week when big orders come in. After working so hard, they just want to live a normal life again."

The women working at the Katunayake and Biyagama zones have to cope with serious accommodation problems. As most of them are internal migrants, they have to find rooms to rent not far from work. But the zones are situated on the outskirts of Colombo, more than an hour from centre of the capital, in regions where there are few accommodation options. Most of the workers rent small rooms in the homes of the local inhabitants, who are very grateful for this income. Many even build new rooms at the back of their houses to increase their earnings. Lodging workers has become their main source of income.

IN THE LANDLORDS' CLUTCHES

To limit their expenses, the workers often group together and share the small rooms rented near the zones between two or four of them. The living conditions are appalling: many of the lodgings are built out of corrugated metal or other materials, making them unbearably warm in a tropical country like Sri Lanka. Almost none of them have sanitary facilities; the toilets are located in the garden or yard, as is the water pail where the women have to wash whilst trying to avoid spying eyes.

"Some landlords open small shops, which they force their tenants to buy from... at prices that are twice as high as they are elsewhere," explains Prasanndika Shyrony, a 20-year-old woman who lodges near the Katanayake zone. "At the boarding house where I live, the landlord evicted one of the tenants because she had bought food elsewhere. There are four of us sharing a room for 2000 rupees (15 euros) a month, but it costs us 10,000 rupees extra for the goods we buy from the landlord's store. Another major problem is that we are often followed, approached and sometimes harassed on the way from the factory to the boarding house."

UNPUNISHED SEXUAL HARASSMENT

"The risk of sexual harassment is real, which is one of the reasons why we have asked the employers to provide buses from the factory to the women's lodgings, says Palitha Atukorale. Some of them have agreed, but the women are dropped at a central point and their lodgings are often situated in narrow, badly lit streets. Most of the girls being sexually harassed are afraid to talk about it. They know that, in their case, the local police often takes sides with the abusers." This harassment further sullies the image Sri Lankan society has of the women working in EPZs, an image already tarnished by the fact that they live on their own, far away from their families.

Most of the girls being sexually harassed are afraid to talk about it. They know that, in their case, the local police often takes sides with the abusers.

All these factors explain why it is not always easy to convince EPZ workers to engage in a long-term trade union battle, especially given that it is their successors who will most likely benefit from any positive results. They have to be offered short-term advantages, as the three main trade unions in the zones are doing (see page 3) with the leisure and training centres set up for them. The NWC has even found outside funding (1) to set up a small boarding house for the women coming from rural areas to work at the Katunayake zone. It can house up to 25 young women for a period of 6 to 12 months, the time it takes them to get used to life away from their families. The NWC takes advantage of the contact it has with these women to offer them training courses about their rights and an opportunity to defend

"I like fighting for the common good"

It was at the NWC Friendship House (see page 3) that I first heard of trade unionism, in the year 2000. I had gone there to use the library, and found out that it was possible to take training courses there on workers' rights. I became a member of the NWC, then started to talk about it to my colleagues. Thanks to what I'd learned during the training courses, they trusted me and started to join too, but the management found out and started putting pressure on me: they would try to find mistakes in my work as a technician, but I worked with extra care and they weren't able to find fault with me. I received verbal threats from the managers. They told me that the factory would be closed down if a trade union was formed. I was worried about these threats, but in 2003 a referendum was organised in the factory and led to a massive vote in favour of creating a union, to my great relief. I have learnt a great deal since I became involved in the union, particularly how to speak in public and have confidence in myself. I like fighting for the common good and I'm satisfied with the benefits we've been able to negotiate in the collective agreements: a wage increase of over 2000 rupees (14 euros) since 2003, an extra day's leave, a transport allowance, etc. Sometimes, so-called unions come and make unrealistic promises to the workers, such as a 5000 rupees wage increase in one year. It's important to be able to explain to our members that we can't make unrealistic demands if we want to maintain a climate of trust with the employer.

J. Vyanaage, aged 42, is a trade union representative at Polytex, a garment factory in the Kogalla export processing zone.

"Trade unionists have resisted moral pressure"

We wanted to set up a union to get better wages and reduce pressure on production targets. The employers tried to pressurise the two main union leaders as far as they could, for example by forcing them to work long stretches in rooms by themselves. It took a referendum of the staff to get the union recognised in 2004. We have not yet managed to sign a collective agreement but have managed to obtain more flexible leave-taking arrangements and a check-off system for payment of union fees.

Pritanthi Aberathnege, 22 years old, is a delegate at the Ready Wear factory in the Biyagama EPZ

themselves through the unions.

The difficulties involved in working in the zones explain why thousands of jobs remain vacant. Although the salaries received in the zones are generally higher than in the rest of the coun-

try, the difference amounts to very little, given the cost of living. "The starting salary paid to workers varies between 4700 and 5700 rupees a month (35 to 42 euros)," explains Swarna Malkanthi, who works for Naigia (Katunayake zone) and is a member of CMU. "Having worked

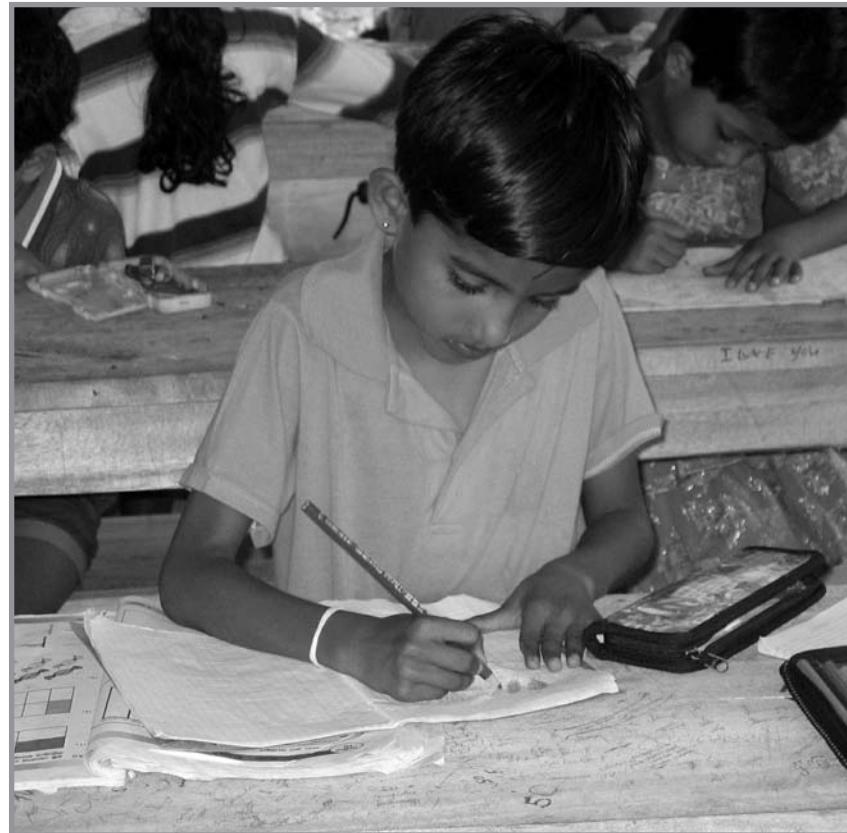
here for four years, I now earn 9900 rupees. I pay 1100 rupees a month for my room, I send 2000 to my family, and then I still have to pay for my food. I'm not left with much to put aside". ●

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(1) From the Belgium-based organisation

"It is our duty as trade unionists to fight child labour"

According to the ILO, some 100,000 children work as domestic staff in Sri Lanka, and a further 35,000 are employed in small businesses. The CWC and NWC union centres affiliated to the ICF-TU and the WCL respectively are both actively involved in fighting against this exploitation. Raising awareness in the community and helping child labourers to attend school are two focus points of their work.

The work of the CWC (1) is mainly focused on the plantations where 95% of its 200,000 members are employed (women make up half of the labour force). Although not many children are employed in this sector, wages are low (approximately 37 euros a month), and the parents are poorly educated and unaware about the importance of schooling. These factors go a long way towards explaining why plantation workers are especially targeted by middlemen on the look out for child domestic servants. "In addition to economic development, raising awareness about the issue of child labour within the community has proved particularly useful," notes CWC vice president Ramiah Yogarajan. "With the help of ILO-IPEC, we were able to set up a number of "children's clubs" in the villages located next to the plantations. These small centres allow children to meet, borrow books, play,.... One child in each centre is appointed as a group leader. He or she receives training from IPEC and is put in charge of organising a whole range of activities (songs, dancing, theatre...). Whenever a case of child labour is reported, the club organises a campaign, with our help, to raise the parents' awareness about the importance of education and to pressure the parents into sending their children to school. All the parents are also invited to attend the clubs' activity programmes."



CHILD SERVANTS IN CAPTIVITY

There are currently about a hundred such children's clubs throughout the country. "Although support from IPEC ended at the beginning of 2006, we are still funding this programme as it has delivered positive results in the fight against child labour," adds Ramiah Yogarajan. "The situations are sometimes close to trafficking. For example, it is quite common to find a child employed by a household far away from his or her family. The employer pays the child's salary to the parents but forbids the child to return to them. We have an employee to whom people can submit their grievances. He has contacts within the police and the National Authority in charge of child protection. Every month, he deals with two or three cases of parents who request our help to recover their children from employers unwilling to release them."

The WCL's Sri Lankan affiliate, the NWC (2) has set up a project aimed at helping children who have dropped out or are likely to drop out of school to attend courses in small, informal classes. The union runs nine remedial schooling centres and three vocational training centres. Amali, the coordinator of the NWC schools, explains how and why this project came about: "Government schools are saturated, often with classes in excess of 40 pupils. Teachers do not have enough time to provide special attention to children with difficulties, in other words, those who are more likely to become disheartened and drop out. Some teachers ask their students to have private tuition in the form of evening classes but the poorer families are unable to meet the cost of such classes, so their children are less likely to assimilate the course and pass

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the exams. Given that the generally poor educational level of these parents, they are unable to help their children with their homework. As a result, their children are left to fend for themselves in the evening, in often cramped homes with an erratic electrical supply, which does not make for a good studying environment. These are the children we try to help out through our remedial classes."

TOWARDS THE PROVISION OF A "SCHOOLING GRANT"

The NWC is also carrying out awareness raising drives on the theme of child labour and welcomes ex-child labourers into its schools. According to Sri Lankan law, schooling is compulsory for all children up to at least age 14. In practice, however, there is generally no follow-up or sanction if a child fails to attend certain classes or drops out altogether. "We try to identify the children who fail to turn up at school and then visit their parents to try to convince them to send their children to our centres", says Budikal, who shares her time teaching at a government school and an NWC school in Polgahawela, a rural district. "There is almost no child labour in the

Uniting and strengthening the trade union movement

There are over 1600 registered trade unions in Sri Lanka... for a workforce of around 8 million people. There are also numerous NGOs specialised in assisting workers, including EPZ workers. To create a degree of unity between them, Oxfam International has founded ALARM (1), a coalition of six textile sector trade unions and four NGOs related to the world of work. ALARM organises campaigns for an increase in the minimum wage, improved working and living conditions, reasonable compensation in case of job losses (especially those caused by the end of the quota system) and greater freedom of association.

One of the projects developed by ALARM involves training a new generation of trade union leaders and activists. The project will be implemented within the coming months, in cooperation with ACILS (2). "One of the recurrent problems affecting most Sri Lankan trade unions is the fact that all the responsibilities are concentrated in the hands of one or two leaders," notes Pete Castelli, the head of ACILS in Sri Lanka. "They're good leaders, but they can't take on everything at once: defending workers' rights, heading recruitment campaigns, fighting alongside the members to improve their working conditions, etc. This is why we have set up this project with ALARM, to train "second line leaders" within several trade unions. We'll also try and help them to choose good targets among EPZ companies, so that they can carry out recruitment campaigns there."

(1) Apparel Industry Labour Rights Movement

(2) American Center for International Labor Solidarity (<http://www.solidaritycenter.org/>)

Restoring children's confidence

One of the aims of the courses provided by the NWC is also to restore the confidence of weaker pupils who have been left behind by their teachers in the government education system.

"Recently, we were successful in putting back on track a child in his third year of primary school who had serious family problems," rejoices Gayathiri, who works as a teacher at the NWC centre in Beruwela, in the coastal region. "His father is a heavy drinker, his mum doesn't work. Nobody encouraged this child to have a proper schooling. At school, since he had difficulty assimilating the classes, his teacher claimed he was stupid and had sidelined him, along with three other pupils. We invited him to attend our remedial classes and a year later his teacher has noticed very substantial progress. He now sees him as a normal pupil."

plantations, yet the eldest children often have to stay at home to watch over their brothers and sisters, which naturally stops them from attending school normally. Children as young as 10 years of age are caught up in this kind of situation. The courses provided by NWC allow many children to pass a very important exam at the end of the fifth year that can lead to the best pupils obtaining financial support from the government to allow them to pursue their studies under appropriate conditions. It is a great encouragement for the NWC and a good argument to convince parents to send their children to our classes."

The NWC school in the Galle district in southern Sri Lanka has seen its attendance levels almost double since the tsunami. The school is set in the "Friendship House" in Koggala (see page 3). "Several schools in this region were destroyed and many children and families were displaced by the natural disaster," says NWC assistant general secretary, Gerald Lodwick. "We received help from the ILO-IPEC programme for setting up a small vocational training centre where adults and teenagers can follow basic training in various sectors: mechanics, information technology, sewing, etc. Over 60% of our students are able to find employment thanks to these training programmes, which also include a few courses on labour legislation and the international labour standards."

Working within the community to promote children's welfare is also im-

proving the image of trade unions and, sometimes, recruiting new members. "We consider it our duty as trade unionists to fight against child labour," explains Gerald Lodwick, "firstly, because a child that works occupies the job of an adult and, secondly, because we are well placed to identify cases of child labour thanks to our members' networks that span all levels of society. We also hope that the young people attending our schools and vocational training centres will go on to join our unions when they turn 18. About one hundred of them have already done so, whilst 450 parents of children we've helped have also joined us as members." ●

(1) Ceylon Workers Congress

(2) National Workers Congress

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