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Spotlight Interview with Htat Khoung (AWU, Burma)

Undocumented Burmese Migrant Woodworkers Are Exploited in the Thai Woodworking Industry

Htat Khoung, aged 26, is an undocumented Burmese (ethnic Arakan) woodworker in Mae Sot, Thailand. As Secretary of the Arakan Workers' Union (AWU), which is affiliated to the Federation of Trade Unions of Burma (FTUB), he is fighting to improve exploitative working conditions for thousands of undocumented Burmese workers in the Mae Sot border area, which is home to an estimated 350,000 Burmese refugees and exiles.

He denounces, as one example, the working conditions in the Taiwanese factory "V.C.", which exports throughout South East Asia and Japan.

What sort of problems are workers facing in the wood and furniture factories in the Mae Sot area?

We left our country because we couldn't find work. We arrived here illegally and the owner of the factory is aware of this, so he takes the opportunity of breaking our labour rights. He knows the economic condition of our country is not good and he knows that he can pay us the lowest wages possible because we are illegal.

Actually they don't consider us to be human beings. They order us to do whatever they want. Sometimes when we are working, they sexually harass the women workers. Sometimes they beat us. And when the owner sees that a worker is not working, he shouts and uses very bad language.

Please tell us more about this intimidation

In one factory in Chanburi (an industrial area of Mae Sot), the owner shot dead a worker who wouldn't listen to him. In other factories workers are handcuffed, arrested and jailed by police after being falsely accused of theft. Some owners hire street fighters to beat workers.

Last year, two sisters at the Ban Thiyai knitting factory went to the owner and resigned. The next day they went back to the factory to take their belongings. The owner followed them down the road in his car and tried to run them over. The sisters ran into a field to escape. The owner got out of his car and chased them and then started to beat them. He was trying to kill them. But another worker saw what was going on and shouted out. The sisters escaped. Otherwise they would have been killed.

Please tell us about health and safety conditions in the workplace

We get nothing for protection. In the cutting section when the workers cut a piece of wood, they have a mask covering their noses, but because of the

machine's vibration, wood particles get into their eyes and sometimes they cut their fingers because they do not have gloves.

When they go to the owner with a cut finger, the owner blames them and says they are not working carefully. When the workers ask for protective gear, the owner says he is ready to pay Thai Bhatt 280 (around US\$9) compensation. The money is the same whether you cut one finger or four. Workers have no choice: we have to work there.

Is it true that the "V.C" factory, which is located on the outskirts of Mae Sot and employs up to 2000 undocumented Burmese migrants(depending on the number of orders in the books), exports its furniture products? Have you ever seen any foreign buyers at the factory?

Yes, it's true. Here, some English-speaking foreigners, Chinese and Thai, including Americans, come to the factory before exporting. They only look for the production quality. They never ask about the workers' conditions.

Is there child labour at the factory?

Yes. Children also work in the factory because the parents get their wages on the basis of the quantity produced by each worker. If they work without children, they get only Thai Bhatt 60 a day (about US\$2). This money is not enough to live on, so they have to take their children with them to work. Some of the children are only eight- or nine-years-old.

How difficult is it to organise and form trade unions in the factories?

It is very difficult and dangerous. In almost all the factories all the owners do the same thing. The owner does not allow the worker to join any organisation outside the factory, as he is afraid that the worker will come to know about workers rights. If the worker knows his rights, then the owners believe they will have less profit.

Is there any smuggling of wood over the border from Burma?

Yes, there is a connection between Burma and Thailand for trade. There is a driver who brings the wood from Burma, for which he gets his commission. The wood is brought in a container from the other (Burmese) side. Some bosses have connections with the police. Many times they bribe the police. When the police get their money, they allow anything to happen. They only want money, so they allow wood to be smuggled - no problem.

How do you see the future for Burmese migrant workers in Mae Sot?

We came here because of the bad policies of our government and the bad economic situation. Here, the factory owners exploit our workers. Sometimes they don't get any money for their work. Sometimes the workers lose their lives. Young workers' lives are ruined. Some girls are sent to brothels. Some workers are murdered out in the fields.

All of us workers have no security. In Thailand we live a life of fear. We are afraid of the employers, the police and the street thugs. We are afraid of being robbed in the street. We don't dare to even hit a Thai dog. If we hit a dog, they'll shoot us. A dog is valued more than us. Therefore, we have no security, not here, nor in our own country. We are like orphans. We daren't even show our face in a crowd. The police look down on us. We are a

lost generation.

In the future we need two things. We need freedom in our Burmese homeland, and we need a strong union. These things will protect our workers.

Interview and pictures David Browne

See also Spotlight Interview with Burmese migrant fishermen (Burma/Indonesia), "Abandoned/Runaway Burmese Migrant Fishermen".
<http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article2456>

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