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Spotlight interview with Maitreyi Shankar (KKPKP - India)

Defending the living of waste collectors whilst protecting the environment

Brussels, 15 January 2009 (ITUC OnLine): A union in the Indian city of Pune has secured concrete improvements for waste collectors, an informal economy workforce made up of 90% women. Maitreyi Shankar, one of the activists of the Waste Collectors' Union, KKPKP (1), tells us about its approach to promoting a socially viable and environmental model of waste recovery.

How did your union come into being?

In 1990, the Pune branch of a Mumbai University, the SNDT Woman University, began offering informal courses to children from the shantytowns who no longer go to school. The majority of those attending these classes were the children of waste collectors. The project managers then realised that to improve these children's lives they would have to start working with their parents. They tried to build up an understanding of this work and to identify how many people were working in this sector. In the beginning, the waste collectors thought that the project managers were representatives of the police or other government authorities, which regularly harass them, so they were reticent to give their details. But when they realised that the aim was to help them, they started identifying themselves.

What does this type of work involve?

It is estimated that there are between 9000 and 9500 waste collectors in Pune, 90% of whom are women. Six thousand five hundred of these are affiliated to our union. There are several types of waste collectors: those who collect the waste in the streets and from public bins; those who work in the landfills; those who go house to house with a trolley, buying waste that is worth a little more and that people do not throw directly in the bin, such as beer bottles, paper, etc.. Our union has carried out a campaign with the authorities to integrate an ecological dimension into waste management: in the past, all the waste was placed in bins on the roadside and the municipal trucks would regularly come to empty them and take the waste to the dump – a costly process. We are promoting the separation of waste at household level: families separate their waste into biodegradable and non-biodegradable and our members go from house to house to collect it and then sell what can be sold. What cannot be reused is sent to the dump, and the biodegradable waste is composted at source.

We carried out a study in 2007 to identify the type of waste that ended up at the dumps and it revealed that 90% was biodegradable. So 80 out of the 85 or 90 trucks collecting waste each day were doing so unnecessarily. It's a waste of public money.

Your approach is in line with the ITUC and ILO initiative to promote green jobs...

Yes. Having said that, our aim is not to create new jobs but to secure the living of waste collectors. The current trend is to employ private firms to handle waste in our cities. Cities such as Surat (in the state of Gujarat) are said to be very clean, but the fact is that a private firm collects all the waste there and treats it using incineration technology. We, on the other hand, are promoting a socially viable model that protects the living of waste collectors, is ecologically beneficial and low cost.

Are Pune's waste collectors informal economy workers?

They are only registered with the union. Everyone who becomes a member receives a membership card that we send to the municipal authorities. It is then stamped and signed, both by the health

department and the solid waste management department. This is a very useful way of combating police harassment: if faced with a problem our members can show this card and explain that the municipal authorities have given them permission to collect waste in such and such a place. We set up this system in 1996, when the waste collectors surveyed identified the need for their work to be recognised and for an end to police harassment as their top priorities. The municipality of Pune is the first local authority in India to issue waste collectors with identity papers.

What are the other main benefits of joining your union?

Our members are covered by a health insurance scheme. Here again, we secured the support of the municipal authorities, which pay the premium for this insurance. The union acts as the intermediary between the workers and the insurance company. In the past, when a worker fell ill, s/he would not seek medical assistance because it was too expensive. With this insurance scheme, the members have access to better health care. We have also tried to set up partnerships with different hospitals to obtain subsidies for more specialised medical attention. We are also looking at arrangements with some hospitals so that our members can receive treatment without having to pay in advance and then wait for the reimbursement; it's the union that pays the hospital.

Is there any collective bargaining in this sector?

Yes, sometimes. We are negotiating, for example, with the authorities to foresee a space for waste collectors where they can separate their waste (the argument being that the municipal authorities set aside parking spaces, so why not for eco friendly activities like sorting waste). When they collect a lot of waste in a bag, they then have to sort it into glass, paper, plastic, metal, etc. They usually do this on the roadside or not far from a shop, and people get angry with them, accusing them of taking their spaces. We want them to be allocated spaces in different parts of the city so they can sort the waste there before reselling it.

Is the sale of waste formal?

No, it's informal, because they sell it to the smallest retailers. These then usually sell it to people with more storage capacity, who then sell it to the wholesalers, who in turn sell it to the recyclers. The last two categories work within the formal economy; they work with more capital. The sales system works like a pyramid, which makes the waste collectors lose a lot of money. In the future, we could look into the possibility of the collectors selling the waste directly to the wholesalers, but the problem is that they do not buy such small quantities.

One of our union's initiatives includes the setting up of our first direct waste buying shop, as many of the buyers cheat our members. If they take 10 kilos of waste, for example, they only pay them for nine. By setting up this kind of shop, the union is ensuring that the women receive a fair price, as well as 10% of the shop's profits. It's like a cooperative, but the first shop only covers 35 women in just one area. The authorities have given us space for 4 more scrap shops.

Is child labour a problem in this sector?

During an initial study into this subject in 1995, we discovered that 650 children were working as waste collectors in Pune, and that each one of them was the son or daughter of one of our members; so we started a campaign against child labour among them. In addition, education policies have changed over the last ten years, the government has made primary education more accessible and has opened more schools. These two factors have led to a lot of changes. In 2007, we performed a second study that showed that 360 children were working as waste collectors in Pune, and only 40 of these were the children of our members. Ten years ago, our members thought that if they educated their children they would not find a job but wouldn't want to collect waste because they had been educated, and would stay at home and become a financial burden on their parents. Now, our members want their children to have a good education so that they no longer have to do the same type of work.

How much do these workers earn?

Their daily income is around two dollars a day. They have to work 8 to 10 hours a day to make this amount, and walk a lot. Those following the model we are promoting, collecting waste from

households, earn the same amount in four to five hours.

We would like to add value to the waste, by promoting its management via waste collectors with some education or their children who have been to school. It is the waste collectors themselves who best understand how this type of business works.

What are the main health and safety problems in this type of work?

One of the main problems for the women is back trouble, as they carry a huge weight on their heads or in bags on their backs. Many are also bitten by dogs or cut by broken glass. And then, the big bins in the streets are really high and they have to jump inside, so some of the women end up with fractures from falling. During the monsoon, waste collectors are also electrocuted, by coming into contact with bare electric wires. Their poor diet also leads to a series of problems, such as anaemia. Our union is working with a company to study the food supplements that could help resolve their nutritional problems. We have started a health programme where we are beginning with testing the waste pickers for anemia, diabetes, blood pressure—those diagnosed with any of the above ailments are being referred to bigger hospitals. The members are also getting tetanus injections through these health camps.

Are you cooperating with other unions?

There are around 20 organisations working with waste collectors in India. Some of them are unions; others are cooperatives or charity organisations.

The trade union movement is very strong in Pune, even in the informal economy, and there is good cooperation between the unions representing the different sectors in the informal economy. In 2007, two of our employees visited SEWA, the Self Employed Women's Association (affiliated to the ITUC), to learn about its health insurance scheme. We were wondering about the possibility of linking ourselves to SEWA, because with our scheme the members have to wait a long time to be reimbursed after paying out the medical fees: the insurance company does everything to delay the reimbursements. But there are a number of obstacles we have to overcome to be able to associate ourselves with SEWA, such as the fact that SEWA mainly operates in the state of Gujarat whilst, on our side, the insurance premium is paid by the government of Maharashtra.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (in Marathi)

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