

Reader asks about conditions of life for female workers in Asia

15 April 1998

Hello.

I am interested in your coverage of the Asian economic crisis. I would like to see more information on two topics:

1) the role of women in South Korea, Thailand, and Indonesia. Historically, women have been exploited by multinational corps from outside, and from union leaders inside their countries. They have been prevented from joining/forming unions. I would like to hear how it is going with these women.

2) a related topic, as workers organized in S. Korea, multi-national corps moved to other Asian countries to exploit cheaper labor. I would be interested in knowing if the formation of unions is a factor in the events happening now. Also, what role women in the unions (or outside of unions) played in this development.

Thanks,

CL

10 March 1998

Dear CL,

Thank you for your e-mail. I am sorry I have not been able to reply to your questions sooner.

1. It is certainly true that in Asia, as elsewhere, women workers are among the most exploited layers of the working class. Forced to accept low paid jobs with very poor working conditions and safety standards, they are usually the first to be dismissed. Often even the minimal conditions established in law are openly flouted by employers and not enforced by governments.

However, just as there is a general paucity of information on the conditions facing the working class as a whole, so there is little detailed information on the position of women workers in Asia.

My only first-hand information comes from an investigation into the Kader toy factory fire in Thailand on May 10, 1993. It was the worst industrial fire in history, killing 174 women and 14 men, and injuring many more. Along with Richard Phillips, I went to Bangkok to investigate the blaze, its causes, the role of the government, unions, NGOs and to examine more concretely the implications of the globalisation of production in Asia. My reports are compiled in the book *Industrial Inferno* available through the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Thousands of mainly young women workers were employed at the Kader factory just outside Bangkok, carrying out tedious

jobs such as hand painting plastic molded toys for export to the US, Australia, Japan and Europe. None of the four buildings had fire escapes, alarms, sprinkler systems, fire hoses or functioning extinguishers. The walkways between the buildings were sealed off.

When the fire first broke out in building number one, the workers were instructed to continue working. When they started to flee it was too late. The building itself was shoddily constructed and collapsed very quickly. One of the two small exits jammed shut as the building frame began to buckle. It was here that 182 workers died, trapped and overcome by noxious fumes.

We were able to speak to a number of survivors—some of whom were in hospital with back injuries after jumping from the third and fourth floors of the building. Many were young girls who had been forced to come to Bangkok from impoverished rural areas, particularly in the country's northeast. They spoke of long hours, forced overtime, and harsh overseers. But perhaps the most chilling part of their testimony was that they regarded Kader, not as a sweatshop, but as one of the better places to work. There were many other factories, they explained, with worse conditions that failed to pay even the minimum wage—about US\$1 an hour at that time.

Such conditions are not confined to Thailand. In Sri Lanka our sister party, also called the SEP, has worked extensively among workers in the Columbo Free Trade Zone (FTZ) and Tamil tea estate workers, many of whom are women. Both of these layers of workers are compelled to live and work in appalling conditions.

Most of the FTZ workers are young rural women who come to the city looking for work. They work long hours for low wages and live in very cramped dormitory-style accommodation. Every aspect of their life is rigidly regimented. They are barred from taking any form of strike or industrial action.

Oppressive conditions, for men as well as women workers, are clearly widespread not only in Thailand and Sri Lanka, but throughout Asia. The economic crisis of the last six months has resulted in a drastic decline in the living standards of working people across the region. But the information available is sketchy.

One source that I have come across is the Hong Kong-based

group—Committee for Asian Women [http://www.freeway.org.hk/~cawhk]. While we do not agree with its political orientation, it does provide some information on the conditions facing women workers in Asia.

2. As far as the trade unions are concerned, I am sure that the proportion of women workers who are members is low. Women are often in those sectors of the economy—Free Trade Zones, small sweatshops, etc—where workers, either legally or de facto, have no right to organise or strike whatsoever. I do not have figures and would appreciate any information you may have.

But the issue is more complex than whether or not women workers have been excluded from trade unions. Around the world, all sections of the working class, men as well as women, have suffered as a result of the betrayals of the trade union bureaucracy. The situation in Asia is no different.

In the countries you name—Indonesia, South Korea and Thailand—most of the trade unions are little more than arms of the state apparatus. The military-backed regimes, which existed in South Korea and Thailand until the late 1980s, and continue today in Indonesia, used the unions as a means for holding down wages and conditions, and preventing any independent struggle by the working class.

At the Kader factory, for instance, there was a company-based union linked to one of Thailand's six union congresses. It had done nothing to change the appalling safety conditions, even though there had been previous fires and obvious hazards existed—inflammable chemicals and raw materials. Following the 1993 fire, none of the unions or union congresses initiated any campaign to improve safety standards in Thailand.

The failure of the trade unions in these countries to defend even the most basic rights of women or other oppressed layers of the working class points to more fundamental issues. The globalisation of production, which has led to the explosive growth of the working class in Asia, has completely undermined the basis of trade unionism itself, which was always limited to attempting to secure reforms within the strictures of the nationally regulated economy.

It is not only the state-run and company unions that have sold out the working class, but the so-called independent unions as well. The most graphic example is in South Korea where the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU)—the mass, unofficial union movement which emerged in the 1980s—has just accepted sweeping changes to the country's labour laws. For the first time in decades, corporations will be able to legally carry out mass retrenchments. As a result, joblessness is set to rise to two million by the end of the year. I have commented on these issues in more detail in a recent article on the WSWS entitled: "The capitulation of the South Korean unions".

3. The issue raised by your second question underscores the incapacity of the trade unions to defend the interests of the working class. The South Korean working class only won its very modest gains through the unions in the 1980s and early

1990s while the country's economy remained highly protected and was expanding. Now that the IMF is demanding the complete opening up of South Korea to global finance capital the unions have caved in to the government and big business.

The trade unions, not just in South Korea, are all driven by the same divisive nationalist perspective—to make their "own" capitalist class "internationally competitive." The South Korean union leaders have responded to investment moving offshore by accepting the demands of the IMF for higher productivity and lower labour costs.

The same process has been taking place internationally. In Australia, where I live, the trade unions, both under the Howard Liberal government and previous Labor governments, have been the principal means for carrying out a wholesale restructuring of industry and the destruction of jobs and conditions.

Workers are being pitted against their class brothers and sisters—country by country, region by region, and even factory by factory—in a never-ending drive for greater productivity and profits. The end product is the complete atomisation of the working class.

The SEP and the Fourth International are completely opposed to any attempt to divide the working class along national lines, or for that matter by gender, race or ethnicity. The working class is an international class facing a common class enemy and can only begin to defend its interests by mobilising independently on the basis of a socialist program.

In Asian countries the young women, who have been drawn from rural areas into the factories and sweatshops of the cities and free trade zones, form a large and decisive layer of the emerging working class. As a particularly oppressed layer, women workers have in the past played an important role in the revolutionary battles of the working class. They will do so again in the struggles ahead.

The economic crisis in Asia is certain to produce social explosions. But the crucial issue is one of revolutionary leadership. If such movements are not to end in defeat it is necessary to build socialist parties to mobilise the entire working class across national and other divides in a unified struggle against the profit system.

Thank you again for your inquiry. If you have further questions do not hesitate to write again.

Regards,

Peter Symonds,

For the *World Socialist Web Site*

9 April 1998



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