Murderous conditions in Sri Lankan free trade zones

Our correspondent
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Chamari Praba, an 18-year-old female worker in the Biyagama Free Trade Zone, was admitted on September 11 to the intensive care unit at Colombo National Hospital with a fractured skull. The injury occurred when Ms. Praba's hair became entangled in a high-speed machine.

The machine pulled the young worker's hair from her scalp and tore off part of her ear. She lay unconscious for several days at the hospital, and has not yet recovered sufficiently to return home. Whether she will be able to resume a normal life is not certain, according to doctors at the hospital. She is undergoing skin transplant surgery to the head, but the doctors say they can not guarantee that her hair will grow in again.

Chamari Praba, an employee of Lanka World, was working near a high-speed machine. The accident took place when she bent over to pick up a production part that had dropped to the ground. The management of the plant is claiming the accident was due to carelessness on the part of Praba. On this basis they hope to avoid paying compensation for the injuries she suffered, and possibly block her from returning to work.

Under Clause 61 of the industrial act, the employer is required to report such accidents immediately to the Labor Department. However Lanka World has failed to file such a report. When the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka made inquiries to the Board of Investments, the supervisory body on foreign investments of the People's Alliance government, the BOI said it had informed the Labor Department of the accident. But the Labor Department told the SEP it had no knowledge of any such accident at the Biyagama Free Trade Zone.

The specialist who is to perform skin transplant surgery on Praba sought to get more information about the nature of the accident and called Inoca, who was working next to Praba at the time. Inoca said: 'I saw her hair sweeping into the high-speed machine next to her. Praba got drawn toward the machine from the iron where she was seated. Although the machine operator disconnected the power, he could not save Praba, as the machine's revolutions continued for several minutes.'

Inoca described how dreadful Praba looked when she got up from under the machine after the accident. Industrial discipline in free trade zone factories is so rigorous that workers are prevented from going to the aid of a fellow worker even under such dire circumstances. Inoca said, 'Several workers including myself who saw Praba immediately after the accident remained in severe shock for several days.'

Although a similar accident had previously occurred in the same factory, no protective measures were implemented. The demands of the workers for headgear had gone unheeded. Corporatist workers' councils in these factories serve only to guarantee greater profits for the employers.

The government offers every possible inducement to international investors in the form of free land, infrastructure development, tax holidays, etc. But the working conditions of the employees are ignored.

When the parents of the accident victim told the management of the factory that they would complain to the Independent Workers Inquiry Committee, established by the Socialist Equality Party, about the accident, the management urged them not to do so, promising all possible assistance to the patient for a speedy recovery. But the parents said they had no faith in the words of management, adding that an exposure of the working conditions in the factory would be for the benefit of all workers.

Not only do workers in the free trade zones labour under dangerous conditions, they are forced to live without decent facilities. A recent survey of 3,810

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boarding houses has confirmed that workers live in hovels without the minimum hygienic and sanitary conditions. The majority of workers do not even have access to proper drinking water.

'Sometimes you get 70 to 80 persons living in virtual tents, and they perform all of their tasks in the same space. They cook, clean and dispose of waste in a very small area, creating very unhygienic conditions,' said Dr. Nihal Jayathilake, Provincial Director of Health.

To hoodwink the resentful workers, the Peoples Alliance regime of Chandrika Kumaratunga has appointed a Presidential Committee on Safety and Welfare of Free Trade Zone Women to carry out a door-to-door advisory service. A committee member, Professor Kumudu Wijewardena, said that a booklet is being compiled and will be distributed among the employees. It contains information on their rights and duties and advice on family planning and similar matters. She added, 'However, there is little grounds for enforceability.'

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