

Textile workers in India rebel against pay cut

A correspondent
1 April 1999

Production at the Well-Knit garment factory, one of the largest employers in the Madras Export Zone (MEPZ), has been paralysed since early last week by a strike/lockout. More than a thousand Well-Knit workers walked off the job March 23 to support a three-week-old strike by 300 workers in the factory's knitting section. The following day, Hong Kong-based Well-Knit locked out the entire workforce.

The knitting section workers began their strike March 2 to oppose a drastic cut in their piece-rate wages. Whereas Well-Knit has paid them 13.50 rupees (about 32 cents US) per piece, Well-Knit now wants to give the knitting workers 7.50 rupees (18 cents US) per piece. On average, workers are able to complete six pieces per eight-hour shift, meaning Well-Knit wants to slash their pay from 81 rupees (or about \$1.92) to 45 rupees (\$1.08) per day.

The knitting workers' strike has caused a split in the local apparatus of the Confederation of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), which is affiliated to the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), and increasingly the strike is taking the form of an open rebellion against the CITU. Ponmudi, the head of the CITU in MEPZ, openly opposed the knitting workers' strike and has demanded they return to work. CITU officials at the Well-Knit factory, meanwhile, mouthed support for the strikers, even while urging the rest of the Well-Knit workers to continue working.

With the widening of the dispute, workers in other departments are raising their own demands for increased wages. Also, workers have demanded the reinstatement of 14 workers who were victimised and then fired, with the support of the CITU leadership, for leading a wildcat strike in 1997. Four of the fourteen also face criminal charges as the result of an altercation with a CITU official last year.

The Ambedkar People's Liberation Front (APLF), a caste-based movement, is trying to exploit the workers'

opposition to the Stalinists to promote its own brand of class collaborationist politics. No sooner had the APLF succeeded in establishing a rival union among the Well-Knit workers, than it urged them to return to work unconditionally. Thus far, Well-Knit has refused to recognise the APLF as the workers' representative, but the meaning of the APLF's actions are clear: it is seeking to win recognition from management by proving that it is better able than the CITU to control the workforce.

The APLF, as its name attests, bases itself on the politics, of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who came to prominence in the 1930s as an opponent of the struggle against British rule and a proponent of the organisation of India's historically-oppressed Untouchable groups as a separate political force. A dedicated anti-Marxist, Ambedkar was instrumental in post-independence India's adoption of reservations (i.e., affirmative action) in education and civil service hiring. Despite Ambedkar's claims, far from eradicating the legacy of caste oppression, reservations have served to reinforce caste consciousness while do nothing to free the vast majority of India's former untouchables from poverty and illiteracy.

The struggle at Well-Knit is directly linked to the East Asian economic meltdown. The loss of domestic markets has caused garment manufacturers in East and Southeast Asia to step up their exports to North America and Europe. Meanwhile, as a result of both wage cuts and the decline in the value of their respective national currencies, the labour costs of East and Southeast Asian manufacturers have fallen vis-à-vis their Indian rivals.

Indian garment manufacturers have sought to compensate for the loss of markets in East Asia by increasing their exports to other parts of the globe. Already, this has embroiled them in a conflict with the European Union. Complaints from Spanish and

Portuguese clothing manufacturers that Indian garment exports have surpassed negotiated quotas have resulted in millions of dollars worth of Indian knitwear and woven garments being seized across Europe. The EU has ordered Indian exporters to repatriate the seized shipments at their own expense.



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