

Over 200 workers hospitalised

Unhealthy conditions in Sri Lanka's Free Trade Zone factories

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The hospitalisation of large numbers of workers employed by Ceramic World factory on two occasions last year highlights the often unsafe and poor working conditions in Sri Lanka's Free Trade Zones (FTZ). The Korean-owned ornament factory employs 950 workers and is situated in the Biyagama FTZ on the outskirts of Colombo—the second largest of the country's three FTZs.

On November 26 more than 260 workers were admitted to Colombo National Hospital for several days with various symptoms including dizziness, chest pain, headache and cough. The factory was closed on the advice of Dr Alwis, head of the Labour Department's Occupational Hazard Division, and only re-opened on December 5. Again 50 workers were hospitalised with the same symptoms.

According to workers at the National Hospital, they became ill after contractors removed a layer of solar heat insulation made of glass wool from the factory roof on November 26. Workers involved in cleaning up the insulation powder became ill within 45 minutes. Others were affected some time later. They suspect that the inhalation of silicon dust from the glass wool caused the illness.

A young female worker explained: "I work in the packing section. That morning I was asked to go to the kiln section. There I fainted and had no idea what happened until later. I was given saline at the hospital. For some patients there was no medicine.

"Even though workers showed little improvement they were discharged and taken away by the factory administration. I also went back to my boarding place but the same night I fell sick again and had to be readmitted. I have been working there for six years. Management wants to make us work by hook or crook. They could have opened the factory after cleaning it."

As another worker explained last weekend, some employees are still suffering: "We are working and suddenly become ill. No one cares. We still have difficulties breathing and some have vomiting, coughing, chest pains, swelling of the stomach and so on.

"Management claims there is no illness and try to gloss over these symptoms saying they are a mental problem of the

workers. The doctor employed at the Medical Center in the FTZ has been manipulated by management. When workers go to him for an examination he says they are not sick and tells them to go back to work."

Dr Alwis from the Occupational Hazard Division told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "The silicon in the solar insulator mixed with dust when it was dismantled. The workers were then deployed in the cleanup disregarding [safety] standards." When asked whether the dust would affect the health of workers in the future, he admitted that the appropriate tests had not been done.

When asked about what had been done prior to the factory's reopening, which he had authorised, Alwis said: "When the factory was reopened on December 5 it had been completely cleaned and it was opened with my consent. There was no complaint about sickness on that day. I suspect that dust on the packing may have caused sickness on following day."

Colombo National Hospital director, Dr H Weerasinghe was more critical. He said that the Occupational Hazard Division had a responsibility to do the necessary tests to determine what had caused the illness. After the second outbreak he stated in the *Daily Mirror*: "This is the second occasion within 10 days that workers with the same symptoms from the same factory have been hospitalised. The relevant officials must take legal action against the factory."

By the time he spoke to the WSWS, however, Weerasinghe was ruling out any legal action: "We can't go courts on these grounds. Such legal actions can only be taken when an accident or sickness occurs while engaging in production process. As this is something outside of that process we can't go to courts."

But he did say that factory owners in Sri Lanka showed gross negligence towards the health of workers in comparison with other countries. "In foreign countries, the factory would be covered with polythene when doing this type of work. In Sri Lanka there is no such practice."

The handbook of the Board of Investment (BOI), which oversees the Free Trade Zones, recommends the provision of sufficient ventilation in factories to protect the health of workers. But the Ceramic World factory has no windows for

ventilation and only large fans fixed to the ceiling. Workers are not provided with masks, gloves or other protective gear.

Several workers told the WSWs: “When we were sick the factory did not provide us with any protection. We had to protect ourselves. There is no safety equipment in the factory even for an accident. If we had been provided with masks at least, the number of sick could have been reduced. The management has no concern about us. But they are keen about goods we produce.”

The workers are members of the All Ceylon Industrial and Commercial Workers Union controlled by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) but as they angrily explained: “This union is doing nothing in this case. Workers have to deal with the union through the Employees Council [joint management-employee committee]. We informed the union through the council about the situation. Neither the union nor the council is doing anything. Both are useless.”

The average monthly wage is just 3,100 rupees (\$US37) but that varies according to the workload. The hours are from 8am to 8 or 10pm, six days a week. Although employees are entitled to a monthly attendance incentive of 400 rupees, it is cancelled if a worker takes a day off sick.

Free Trade Zone workers were entitled to a pay rise of 400 rupees a month in November 1999 but Ceramic World has not paid it. When workers threatened to strike in January 2000 over the pay rise, management granted a graduated increase—300 rupees for those with more than seven years service, 200 rupees for 5-7 years service and 100 rupees for 3-5 years service.

The vast majority of FTZ workers also face unsafe, dirty and dangerous conditions. Most factories do not provide protective masks, gloves or other gear when needed. Garment workers often suffer chest pains caused by inhaling bits of thread and also regularly injure their fingers.

Female workers at Gartext Garment explained: “We worked from 8am to 10pm non-stop last January, February and March. Those who worked in the day had to work at night as well. It's not possible to work that way. We get sick quickly. Most suffer from back pain, knee pain and colds etc. We have to bathe at night so we get colds. Those who sit constantly suffer from back pain and girls in the packing section suffer from knee pains, as they have to keep standing. Most have gone home and not returned.”

The BOI claims to have instructed investors to maintain a fully-equipped first aid room in each factory but it is not adhered to. The “first aid rooms” in factory premises lack the necessary facilities. Instead of employing a qualified nurse, a young girl is employed instead. The only medicines available are basic painkillers such as Panadol and Disprin, and Vintageno (a local balm).

In some cases workers have died as a result of the lack of adequate safety measures. On May 3, 1993, Premalal Jayakody, 23-year-old worker at the Korea-Ceylon shoe factory in the Katunayake FTZ was killed when his head was crushed under a

hydraulic pressure hammer. Management and the media tried to portray his death as an accident caused by Premalal himself. But a workers inquiry conducted by the Revolutionary Communist League, the forerunner of Socialist Equality Party, found that the management had forced Premalal use the machine even though its safety mechanisms were broken.

The inquiry also revealed broader lack of health and safety measures. Workers at the Ansell Lanka rubber glove factory in the Biyagama FTZ, for instance, regularly suffered from headaches, coughs with bleeding and fatigue. In some cases, the babies of female workers were borne with heart ailments.

Many of the ailments were caused by the ammonia that is added to rubber latex mixture to keep it liquid. Ammonia was stored in a tank and excess ammonia collected in an outside water tank, which was opened to atmosphere. The workers who cleaned the latex tanks were not provided with oxygen tanks or goggles to protect their eyes from the ammonia gas. In 1997 three Ansell Lanka workers died after hospitalisation.

The conditions in workers' hostels—mostly private dwellings in the surrounding areas—also contribute to health problems. The accommodation usually lacks clean drinking water, proper ventilation and toilets. Most workers live in small rooms partitioned with boards—a room is often shared by three or four workers who sleep on mats.

A group of young workers in Biyagama said: “Sanitary conditions at our boarding places are bad. There are about 100 rooms, but only seven toilets and five wells for water. We have to wait in queues to use the toilet in the morning. We cannot get a good meal. We just cook some rice with a vegetable curry for the lunch or dinner. For breakfast we have to be satisfied with something small like a bun or a roll.”

Most of those who work in the Free Trade Zones are young workers from rural areas such Nuwaraeliya, Balangoda, Rathnapura and Anuradhapura. While the BOI and the government claims to regulate the operation of factories in the FTZs, their primary concern is to attract investors by offering cheap labour—in other words, low pay, long hours and poor conditions—along with tax holidays and other financial incentives. As a result, workers pay a terrible price through the loss of their health and in some cases their lives.



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