

Oppressive conditions in a Sri Lankan garment factory

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12 January 2006

Retrenchments and deteriorating working conditions are producing mounting discontent in Sri Lankan garment factories, where about 300,000 workers are employed, mostly women.

It is now one year since the January 2005 abolition of the previous international quota system, which gave “developing countries” almost guaranteed shares of the world market. Since the quota system was ended at the behest of the major industrial countries—the US and EU—garment exporters have been engaged in cut-throat struggles to maintain their market shares. As in other countries, it is the workers in the Sri Lankan clothing plants who are bearing the brunt as companies drive down labour costs to protect profits and retain markets.

The Super Light Garment Industries factory, in Jamalapura, a remote village in the Kandy district, about 140 km from Colombo, is typical. In addition to garment plants in free trade zones (FTZ), businesses have been allowed to set up factories in rural areas with the same FTZ tax concessions. At the end of the 1980s and in the early 1990s, the United National Party government launched a “200 garment factory” program in response to high levels of rural unemployment.

Super Light Garment Industries, which was established during the late 1980s, has enjoyed Board of Investments (BOI) concessions, such as a five-year tax holiday, duty-free imports of raw materials and capital goods, and exchange control exemptions. It is not a large factory, employing around 250 workers, with 90 machine operators and 130 helpers, mostly female. They come from the villages such as Pussallawa, Mawathura, Mawela and Vatakedeniya. The company exports to countries such as the United States, Poland and India.

A worker at the factory told the WSWs that harsher working conditions have been gradually imposed over the past year. Production managers were changed at least six times during 2005, and each demanded increased productivity. Now there is a new threat to cut the monthly attendance bonus of workers if targets are not fulfilled.

Prior to the termination of the quota system, the factory owner had boasted that he had no problems because the factory had “enough orders”. But, the worker explained, “the tune was later changed”. The owner “convened a meeting at the beginning of 2005 to warn employees about the abolition of quotas and to call for quality and speedy work to retain buyers. He repeated the warning in the middle of the year.”

In recent months, management has been slashing overtime payments, claiming that the factory was running at a loss, as well as paying wages late.

“Even though the salaries are due on the tenth day of each month, since the middle of last year workers have had to wait another few days or weeks. In the meantime they have to borrow to pay for bus fares to come to work and avoid shops where they have accumulated debts,” the worker explained.

When November’s wages were not paid by November 22, workers walked off. A small note was circulated among them, saying “[A]ren’t you ashamed to work even though you have not been paid your due wages!”

“As a last resort, angry employees refused to return to the machines and boycotted work after lunch that day. However, because we had no program or organisation, the action could not be continued for more than a few hours. We only got the salaries on November 26.”

Within two days of the strike, management sacked a female worker, accusing her of writing the note that sparked the protest. The company had no evidence but dismissed her in order to intimidate other employees. The walkout, however, points to the growing discontent among apparel workers not only in this factory but throughout the industry.

Conditions are already intolerable. Discussing the situation in the factory, the worker explained: “Most of the young workers are school dropouts, not because they are not good at studies but because they hardly had the means to continue their schooling.

“One 19-year-old worker told me that as she has three younger sisters, and her father’s income as a day-labourer

was not enough to maintain the family. Her mother had to leave for the Middle East to work as a house maid. The young girl had to stop schooling half-way to earn a living. She treks 2-3 km from her village, Thambiligala, to the factory every day after preparing the meals for her sisters.”

Tamil women from nearby tea estates were also coming to the factory because unemployment was acute in the plantations. A single mother travelled 20 km by public transport from an estate area every day. Her income was not enough to pay for her daughter’s education. By the end of each month she had to take out loans just to pay for her bus fares to get to work. “She continues to come, hoping for a better day,” the worker said.

Breakfast was provided for employees (frequently less than 250 grams of bread with spiced coconut) but they had to finish it within 15 minutes. Guards in the breakfast room made sure all workers vacated the room by 8.15 in the morning. The lunch break was only half an hour and the afternoon tea break was 15 minutes.

He added: “Each worker has a production target to be finished by the end of the working day. If a worker cannot meet the target, she has to work overtime without any additional payment. If an individual worker fulfills her quota but the factory output has not achieved the target set for the day, all the workers have to work overtime without pay.

“The operators are graded. Grade A workers get 4,500 rupees (\$US45) per month and grade B workers get 3,800 rupees, less than \$1.50 per day. Grade C and D workers get even less. A helper gets only 3,200 rupees and an unskilled trainee worker gets just 2,800 rupees. The minimum apprenticeship period for a trainee worker is six months but it can be extended at management’s whim. Most workers acquire the required skills within a month or so but have to wait several more months to get the salary of a skilled worker. This is manipulation to pay less but get more work.”

There is a “monthly attendance bonus” of 1,000 rupees (\$10) for operators and 500 rupees for helpers but the payment is denied even for one day’s absence.

“These grades are also used to split workers. Management consciously follows the ‘divide and rule’ principle. For instance, breakfast time for the staff (engaged in supervisory and administrative work) is different to that for the factory floor workers. Plastic plates and cups are provided for workers, while staff members get served on ceramic plates or glassware. Even though workers are not allowed to wear shoes in the factory, the staff must wear them. Workers have a card system for attendance but staff members can sign an attendance book,” he said.

“In return for all these ‘facilities,’ staff members are strictly prohibited from taking the workers’ side in any dispute. They are expected to squeeze the workers to get the

maximum output.”

In a country where the minimum cost of a cheap meal is more than 35 rupees, a worker’s income is hardly enough to cover the essentials for even one person. Some workers, however, are compelled to maintain their families. One female worker said it was difficult to even buy milk powder for her children. When bus fares and shop debts were paid, hardly any money remained.

Visits to the factory by labour department officials are rare and even then the management threatens workers not to talk to them or make complaints. Workers suspect that these officials are “looked after” by the management. “We can’t talk about the real situation when the labour office visits us,” the worker commented. “If we say anything, staff members will tell the big boss and we will have to quit the job.”

Under these increasingly oppressive conditions, the company is using police methods to prevent workers organising. Criticisms of the factory management are banned. If somebody is caught complaining, they can be sacked immediately without any inquiry. Management is particularly careful to ensure that new recruits comply with these threats.

There is no political discussion for fear of a witchhunt but workers are generally disgusted with both of the major parties. “No government looks at our problems. We will not get any help or relief from any government. The factory owner gave several hundred thousand rupees to the United National Party to protect his interests. That also comes from the income we earn for the company,” the worker said.

He thought that a layer of employees were sympathetic to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party candidate Mahinda Rajapakse, who won the November presidential election. “That is because Rajapakse made lots of promises to solve the problems of the masses. However, the situation will not last long, I think, because nothing will change for the better under his government either.”



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