

Tirupur suicides: The human cost of India's capitalist expansion

A WSWs reporting team
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World Socialist Web Site reporters visited Tirupur—a garment manufacturing boom town in south India—to investigate the conditions that led close to a thousand garment workers their spouses or children to commit suicide in the two years ending in September 2010.

We first spoke with the relatives of a 25-year old machine operator named Gautham. They explained to us the tragic circumstances under which both he and his wife, Priya, recently committed suicide.

When Gautham returned home last September 14, he saw his wife Priya hanging from a rope from the ceiling. Devastated by the suicide of his wife, with whom he had fallen in love with two-and-a-half years before, Gautham went to his parents' home and there consumed poison.

The couple was being hounded by local moneylenders from whom they had been forced to borrow. Goons hired by these moneylenders would frequently harass Priya when Gautham was absent from home. Unable to bear the pressure any longer Priya committed suicide. Now, the parents of Priya and Gautham are left to fend for a one-and-a-half year old grandchild without any support.

Another worker, Saminathan, wrote the following note before taking his life:

It has been 32 years since I moved to Tirupur. The principal amount of the debt I owe is Rs. 21,000 (\$467). For the past four months I have been unable to pay towards the loan. I feel both ashamed and hurt because of this. I no longer have a desire to live. I do not know how to get out of this misery. I am beginning the journey towards the unknown. I have no problems from my children. My only wish is to see that my

youngest daughter gets married.”

Harassment from moneylenders also led Amir, a 26 year-old cutter in a garment unit in Tirupur, to swallow poison. He had been forced to take out a loan to pay for his sister's marriage, then, when he was unable to make payments, found the debt rapidly escalating.

We also learned about the circumstances that led another 27 year-old garment worker, Selvam, to take his life. Selvam fractured his hand in an accident. When he was healed, his employer refused to take him back and he was unable to find another job. Without income, his marriage disintegrated and he became separated from his wife, six year-old daughter and infant son. Soon after Selvam took his life.

Ibrahim, a 27 year-old cutter at a Tirupur garment factory, spoke to the WSWs about the conditions that he and tens of thousands of other garment workers face.

“With the meager wages we get,” said Ibrahim, “we do not have enough funds for the most basic requirements for our families. We work long hours, usually 12, 16 and sometimes 24 hours a day in order to earn more. Because of this we do not have any time to spend with our families or to play with our children.

“There are no government hospitals or ESI (Employees State Insurance) hospitals for us here. Even if it is a life threatening physical ailment, we do not have access to medical facilities that we can afford. Many people here have lost their lives because they could not afford to go to a private clinic or to a private hospital.

“We are nothing but slaves. Whichever political party comes to power in the state or at the center they will provide no solution to our misery. There will be no change to our plight. No particular caste or religion will give us food. We must unite as workers overriding our divisions by caste, religion, and language.”

Certainly, the authorities are apprehensive about the mood in Tirupur. The day we visited the city, a thousand police mounted a door-to-door search in worker neighbourhoods claiming to be looking for Maoist insurgents. The real purpose of the operation was to intimidate the garment workers on the eve of a planned protest.

Although the protest was organized jointly by the employers and purported pro-worker organizations like the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) to urge the central government to place a ceiling on yarn exports, there was no doubt concern that the workers might act independently. In recent months there has been a wave of militant strikes and plant occupations in Tamil Nadu.



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