

Nokia India workers speak on job threats and low wages

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More than 4,000 Nokia workers took part in the daylong protest on March 31 against the cell phone manufacturer's threat to close its Chennai plant in Tamil Nadu, India. WSWs reporters spoke to workers at the demonstration and later at the factory gates.

"Our main demand is that the company should give up its plan to retrench thousands of workers. If it doesn't give up the plan for downsizing then workers would consider stepping up further struggles," said, Venkatesan, a 23-year-old worker.

"I have been working a Nokia for the past six years," Venkatesan continued, "When I was recruited as a trainee I got paid Rs.4,500 (US\$75) per month. I have completed degrees. Nevertheless, I joined the work on the basis of my grade 12 education. Now I get Rs.11,000 (US\$183) monthly. My native home is Jolarpet where most people depend on agriculture. Educated youth like me have to come to the city. My work colleagues come from different districts of Tamil Nadu. Since company transport is available for workers they travel to work for one to two hours from areas where accommodations are cheaper.

"We have a Future Saving fund (PF), medical benefits (ESI) and canteen facilities at work. However, there is no job guarantee. Management sacked most of the contract workers in 2013. Now our jobs are at risk again because of a decline in orders and the company's tax-related problems." Venkatesan also mentioned about the recent shutdown of three Nokia supplier companies—Vintek and two others—which operated within the Nokia premises.

Rajamohan, a 24-year-old worker, spoke about backbreaking conditions and uncertain future in the contract labor system: "Most of us scored good marks in exams at the age of 18 and came to work here. After working for six years now we face job losses. Although

we are permanent workers and paid more than contract workers, our situation is similar to contract workers. My friends worked as permanent workers for six years at the closed down Vintek company and they lost their jobs. Now they work as casual or contract workers in different companies.

"Tomorrow we will face the same situation. For example, there are more than 5,000 contract workers in the neighboring Hyundai plant and they have been working there for more than five years. After five years those workers got transferred to other departments under the guise of a giving workers a 'break' from the same routine thus making them beginners in these other departments. This is because the management feared that after five years as contract workers they would demand regularization of their employment and demand other benefits as well. The trade unions don't fight for the abolition of the contract system."

Vinayagam, a 25-year-old engineer, said, "At this main site Nokia employs nearly 8,000 workers. In some areas of the plant, particularly housekeeping and gardening, workers are employed on a contractual basis for very low wages. When 3,000 employees were fired (as part of the company's dismissal of 10,000 workers worldwide in 2012-13) some of the management staff were also sacked in addition to permanent and contract workers.

"I was raised in Rajapalayam, next to Madurai, where textile jobs and agricultural work are available. Since I am an engineering graduate I could find a job in textiles, but I took this job at Nokia because I get paid Rs.20, 000 (US \$ 333) per month, which is more than what I could get in the textile industry. After paying for my rent and food expenses I send Rs.15, 000 (US \$ 250) to my family every month.

"Nokia's contract employees are paid from Rs.5,500

to Rs.8,000 (US\$133) per month, including overtime pay. Though I get paid more than others I have a lot of uncertainty regarding my job. This year the company plans to shed another 2,000 jobs or more. Nokia attributes this to the lack of orders. All different types of workers would be affected by the retrenchment and I could be one of them.”

He added, “Those permanent workers and management staff that were retrenched in 2013 were given three months salary per head as settlement. Those who worked for five years or more were given an additional one-month salary for every year they worked. During this period a permanent worker used to get a monthly salary ranging from Rs.10,000 (US\$166) to Rs.15,000 (US\$250).

“However, the contract workers were the majority and nearly 2,000 lost their jobs. They were sent home empty handed virtually without any financial settlement. Most of them came from poor agricultural families. They got a pittance from the company, from Rs.4,000 (US\$66) to Rs.6,000 (US\$100), which is their monthly wage.”

Krishnaraj, 23, responded to the criticism of the trade unions by the WSWS reporters: “You say the unions are not for the workers. But we thought they stood up for the workers with a red flag in their hands. We thought since they are Communists they would fight for workers and be honest. I agree with you. We are not aware of the fact that you have mentioned about CITU leader A. Soundararajan’s remarks during the Comstar workers’ strike, when he said if Jayalalitha (the present chief minister of Tamil Nadu and the leader of the regional ruling party, the AIADMK) came to power the situation would turn in favor of workers!

“Here in Tamil Nadu, both the AIADMK and the DMK have been against our struggles. We saw this during the Foxconn and BYD workers’ struggles. The CPM and CPI are aligned with these parties. Nevertheless, when they hold red flags in their hands the union leaders behave like this is the way forward for workers like us.”

A female Nokia worker told the WSWS, “In this company 60 percent of the workers are female. They come from as far as Vellore, Arakkonam and travel about two hours in a company bus to come to work. It is not easy for women to come like that. Now we are staging a protest against the company’s plan to retrench

workers and shut down the company.”

“The company thinks since the majority are female workers they can stop this struggle from developing. The Wintek management easily handled opposition from workers to its closure in 2013. Vintek employed more female workers than the Nokia, around 70 percent of the workforce. We are determined to fight to the end to win our demands.”

Those female workers who lost their jobs, she said, will either go back to their villages or search for another job in the Special Economic Zone. They cannot expect any luxurious life.”



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