

A sweatshop for Victoria's Secret and Calvin Klein

Sri Lanka: Kilinochchi garment workers denounce harsh working conditions

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Workers from MAS Active Vaanavil and MAS Intimates, two factories in Sri Lanka's war-ravaged north, recently spoke with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters about their sweatshop conditions. The plants, owned by MAS Holdings, a multinational garment corporation, are in Arviyal Nagar, seven kilometres from Kilinochchi.

MAS Holdings employs about 95,000 people, mainly women, in 53 plants across 17 countries, including Haiti, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Honduras, Jordan, Vietnam and the US.

The \$US1.6 billion conglomerate is one of Sri Lanka's largest apparel manufacturers, employing 70,000 workers in 40 facilities. This includes the MAS Fabric Park, the country's first privately-owned apparel intensive free trade zone. The company produces for brands like Victoria's Secret, Marks & Spencer and Calvin Klein.

The MAS plants in Kilinochchi opened in 2012, three years after the end of the Sri Lankan government's bloody war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Both desperate to attract capital, former President Mahinda Rajapakse and current President Maithripala Sirisena offered tax holidays and various concessions to MAS and other investors. Seeking a ready supply of cheap labour, companies established garment plants at Vavuniya, Puthukudiyiruppu, Mannar, Jaffna and in the east of the island.

The garment and textiles industry is the country's main foreign currency earner, providing 42 percent of export income, with predictions the revenue will climb to \$5 billion this financial year.

The two factories in Vaanavil and Vidiyal employ

over 4,000 workers, aged between 18 and 30, from three northern districts—Jaffna, Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu. Because there are no nearby boarding facilities, the workers are transported from their villages each day, leaving home at 5.30 a.m. to work from 7.30 a.m. to 5.30 p.m.

A bus driver told the WSWS there were only 23 vehicles to transport workers, so between 100 and 110 workers were crowded onto each bus. Overtime is compulsory, depending on company requirements, so some workers do not return home until 11 p.m.

Most production is performed by women, some of whom have to stand next to machines for the whole working day. Daily production targets in one part of the Vaanavil plant have been doubled to 120 pieces of shirt sleeves per worker.

Workers said the cheap food supplied at the factories was substandard. Many employees suffer from physical and psychological complaints, including swelling, spinal and joint pain and varicose veins. Some female workers complained that some colleagues had miscarriages because of the extended time they must stand.

Workers who feel ill are not allowed to leave the factories to see a doctor. MAS runs a chemist dispensary on the premises but the only drugs available are paracetamol and amoxicillin. Workers suffering critical illnesses are seen by external doctors inside the factory. Women are allowed just three months' maternity leave for their first and second children, and 45 days for a third child.

When the MAS plants opened in Kilinochchi workers were paid only 9,500 rupees (\$US75) per month. After several increases they now receive 21,000 rupees but

only if they reach production targets. Workers said higher prices for essential items made it difficult to survive on the current salaries.

A 22-year-old worker said she had been working for MAS for one year. “I’m working standing on one leg and operating the machine with the other leg. I suffer from heel swelling and chest and back pain, with most of my day spent in the factory. My monthly income, including overtime, is only 18,000 rupees.

“There is no leave, even if you’re sick, and if you do take leave the 2,000-rupee attendance allowance is deducted from your salary. Women working in the printing section are prone to miscarriages because of the unusual heat of the machines.

“Production from our factory is exported to America and Europe. If we can’t meet the production targets we’re scolded with filthy words by the management. Some people left the job because of this behaviour. There are only 16 workers in our section but we have to complete 1,500 to 1,800 items per day.”

The young woman said only one of the two air conditioners in her area functioned and workers were only provided with low-quality face masks each week. Numbers of workers suffered from respiratory problems and constantly sneezed.

Another worker said she was affected by dust and was receiving medical treatment. The 25-year-old explained that her seven-member family lived in a two-room house provided by an Indian charity.

“We have to work faster than a machine in this factory,” she said, but “we are only earning money to settle our loans with the banks and leasing companies.” She explained that her sister worked in the same factory and her legs were swollen because she spent most of her workday standing.

“My husband left me with my daughter and I didn’t receive any assistance from the government,” she said. “We have to travel nine kilometres to get to the town and six km to the hospital. Workers don’t get time to relax and sometimes, if we get a fever and can’t work, it heavily impacts on us. We only get 14 days’ leave per year and can only get funeral leave if it is for a family member.”

A 23-year-old worker explained that she started work at the age of 20 but after seven months began suffering spinal pain. Doctors advised her to leave the job and she is still under treatment.

Another worker, the mother of one child, said employees complained about their plight to the Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers Union (CMU).

After union officials asked them to provide written details of the working conditions and their names the workers refused, fearing the information would be handed over to the management. The CMU is notorious for its betrayal of workers’ struggles and for having close relations with company managements.

“We decided to leave the union,” the young woman said, and added: “At least our suffering will come into open through you [the WSWS].”

A villager who lived near the Vaanavil plant spoke of the pollution from the facility. “Four years back the company began recycling the human waste and established a drainage unit. This has now been abandoned and the wastewater is collected in a huge hole there. The environment is now heavily polluted. We complained several times to the public health officer and village officer but this was in vain.”

A Rural Development Society member from Ponnalai village near the Vaanavil plant said: “While many factory workers leave the company there are just as many in the queue looking for jobs. Huge pressure is imposed on workers to produce more in the shortest time.

“We thought lives would improve if there was a factory here but people are becoming patients in this drive for profit. They [the military] destroyed everything during the war and now the poor are facing illness and poverty.”



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