

Indian workers face slave-like conditions in Sri Lanka

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World Socialist Web Site reporters recently spoke with about 30 young Indian workers currently employed on an electricity power-line project in rural Sri Lanka. The highly exploited workers are forced to live in overcrowded and squalid conditions and not paid for long periods of time.

Most of the workers are from Kargalo village, Hazaribagh District in the northeastern Indian state of Jharkhand and were recruited by the Chennai-based Krishna Power Company. The company has won a contract from CEYLEX Power Company to build high-voltage power lines in the Galewela area in Dambulla, which is located in north-west Sri Lanka. The Indian and Sri Lankan companies are the beneficiaries of the gross exploitation of these workers.

The workers are living in a dilapidated house in Katupotha village in Sri Lanka. Their accommodation has no proper sanitation facilities and lacks safe drinking water. The young men are sleeping on rugged mats and surviving on the most rudimentary meals.

The Krishna Power Company persuaded the men to sign an agreement that gave it total control over them, including taking their passports in exchange for a guaranteed monthly wage. The promised monthly wage was just 18,500 Indian rupees (\$US261) with an additional 4,000-rupee monthly allowance.

The contract company violates even Sri Lanka's limited labour laws, forcing their employees to work almost 16 hours a day, without any overtime payments, and neglects basic safety procedures at the dangerous project. The Indian workers, who have limited education and only speak Hindi, have not been paid for the past three months. With the assistance of the local community, they recently made an official complaint about their treatment to the police.

One of the workers, **Punith**, who is 26 years old, said

: “We face very difficult working conditions. We go to work at eight in the morning and come back at midnight. We cook in the morning and eat that same meal three times. Today we cooked rice and ladies fingers [okra] and dhal for curries. This is the only way we can manage to save any money.

“We have families and children who are attending school but the wages here are not enough for us anymore. This is why we decided to give up this job and agreed to go back to India. The authorities are now working on this.”

The workers explained that they had been employed all around Asia, signing two-year agreements with manpower companies to try and secure a living income.

Pijekumar, 26, said: “I have two children and one is going to school. I can't feed my family on this salary even though we work very hard. We will have to go back to India and find jobs with another company. We have worked in Kenya, Burma, Saudi Arabia and Qatar and even though the work there was hard, we stopped work at 6 p.m.”

Local residents have assisted the workers in defiance of anti-Indian communalist campaigns by Sinhala extremist parties such as the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna.

A woman running a small tea shop in Katupotha denounced the power company's brutal exploitation of the Indian workers. “Those young workers come to my shop but it is very difficult to communicate with them,” she said. “They don't spend much and have now been reduced to buying short-eats [small snacks]. I've only just learnt they have not been paid for months. They too are human beings and innocent victims. It is a sin to deprive them of their salaries,” she said.

A transport worker, who assisted WSWs reporters, angrily denounced the companies. “These criminal

companies should be punished. How can they cheat these people after using their labour? Whoever they are, these people are working to save their families.”

The terrible conditions faced by these young workers are typical of those facing millions of workers in the land-locked north-east of India and most of the Indian subcontinent. According to recent reports, about five million working-age residents in Jharkhand were forced to migrate in search of jobs and education in the first decade of this century. The state’s official unemployment rate is currently 7.2 percent and, according to an Annual Labour Bureau Survey in 2016, 48.6 percent of all graduates were unemployed.

Last year’s Jharkhand: Economic and Human Development Indicators revealed that 39.1 percent of the state’s population is below the poverty line and 19.6 percent of the children under five years of age are malnourished.



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