

# MAS factory workers in Kilinochchi, Sri Lanka, discuss concerns over pandemic

Subash Somachandran  
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Workers of the MAS Holdings-owned Vaanavil and Vidiyal garment factories in Kilinochchi in northern Sri Lanka are working without social distancing or adequate health facilities to protect themselves from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Around 3,000 young workers, mainly female, employed in these factories are concerned about the raging pandemic in the country and globally. MAS-owned Bodyline factories at Horana and Agalawatte in Western Province were temporarily closed early this month, as dozens of workers were found to be infected. These factories were soon reopened, despite workers' concerns amid the disastrous pandemic situation globally and in Sri Lanka.

MAS is the largest garment-producing multinational in South Asia, with factories in 15 countries employing around 99,000 workers. It produces apparel for international brands such as Victoria's Secret, Marks & Spencer and Calvin Klein.

In early October, more than thousand workers were found to be infected at Minuwangoda Brandix Fashion Wear. Before that, workers had been forced to work even after there were indications and symptoms of infection. Brandix is another major garment company in Sri Lanka, employing more than 50,000 workers at different facilities.

The Government Agent of Kilinochchi, Roobavathi Ketheeswaran, said: "Six persons have been identified as corona-positive cases and 516 persons are isolated in the Kilinochchi district. All schools are closed again, because a 71-year-old man was identified as corona-positive on Monday [November 23] in the district."

Sri Lanka's official COVID-19 cases have increased to more than 22,000 yesterday, with 99 deaths. The low numbers are mainly a result of very limited testing. President Gotabhaya Rajapakse lifted a partial

lockdown in the Western Province early this month, declaring that the government had opted for "carrying our normal activities while controlling the disease." In effect, he was asking people to live with the surge of the pandemic, accepting it as the "new normal."

Government institutions and private companies are forced to remain open, and employees must report for work. The government is implementing these norms ruthlessly. President Rajapakse declared 15,000 port workers were performing essential service on November 17, when their attendance went down as dozens of workers had been tested positive, in order to force them all back to work.

All the opposition parties, including the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) are supporting the government's murderous policies.

Workers at Vaanavil and Vidiyal spoke recently to the *World Socialist Web Site* explaining their working conditions. While there is no infection reported in these factories so far, workers said they fear contracting the virus.

Workers come to the factories from the Kilinochchi, Jaffna and Mullaithivu areas in company-owned buses. As they get onto the bus at different points, they are crammed into the bus, without any social distancing. Getting off the bus, all have to rush to put their signatures on fingerprint machines.

At work, employees have to move about to collect materials to production unit and other activities, closely contacting each other.

One worker asked, "How can we observe social distancing?" He added: "We are wearing normal kind of mask which is made of residual fabrics after cutting cloths for garments. These masks are not in good quality even. This situation shows ignoring coronavirus

prevention guidelines. The factory administration does not care about our lives.”

Health authorities have issued guidelines to various institutions, including factories, when a reopening of the economy was announced at the end of April. Only the minimum guidelines were observed, and for a few weeks at that. Recently, these authorities issued more such “guidelines.”

The government is aware that these are only guidelines are only on the books. They were issued to pretend that various state-appointed task forces supposedly working to prevent COVID-19 are concerned about workers’ health. In reality, they aim to compel workers go back to work.

Another worker told the WSW: “The factory is bringing materials from Colombo. I suspect these materials are from closed factories which could carry the virus. Who knows?”

In a meeting with workers, top company officials said that if any worker tests positive, only that worker would be isolated but the factory would never be closed.

Last month, a worker showed symptoms and was suspected to be infected. That worker was only isolated at home. When tested it was found he was not infected. However, management did not close the factory or test others. If a worker shows symptoms, such as fever and cough, he is isolated briefly in a room. If he appears to be normal, he is asked to work. This is the routine of the factory.

Last month, the MAS Holdings-owned Bodyline garment factory located at Horana, which employs about 6,000 workers, was compelled to close down. One member of a 200-strong team was tested positive. When 145 team members were tested, another 34 were found to be infected.

Workers reported that at work, the conditions of basic facilities are poor: lavatories and bathrooms are inadequate, and workers have to wait with difficulty to use them. Moreover, facilities are not properly maintained, risking other kind of infections.

The situation of the canteen is bad. Workers depend on the canteen for meals, but the meals provided there are sometimes inedible, with worms or moths in the food. Even when workers complained, the administration did not take any remedial action.

Working hours run from 7 in the morning to 5:30 in

the evening. Workers have only 30 minutes for lunch break and 30 minutes for morning and evening tea breaks.

Moreover, workers are forced to do overtime during the Buddhist Poya public holidays, and working two Saturdays per month without leave is compulsory.

Speaking about low wages, one worker said a new hand would get 21,000 rupees (around \$US115) as a basic monthly salary, while a more experienced worker gets 23,000 rupees with overtime paid at 175 rupees per hour: “A single worker can manage with this salary, but with a big family it is very difficult. A friend of mine has three children. Unable to manage, she takes loans. How can such workers educate their children and live a normal life?”

Amid the pandemic, the factory has increased production. Workers said, however that the company has announced that it will not pay the December bonus.

Many factories have come up in the north, particularly to the Vavuniya and Kilinochchi areas, after the bloody, thirty-year communal war in the north and east against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). These companies rushed there to exploit cheap labour amid the social catastrophe created by the war. Now they are ruthlessly exploiting workers, with the state’s blessing, without any concern for workers’ lives amid the COVID-19 pandemic.



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