

As COVID-19 surges, Sri Lankan apparel workers support Global Workers Inquest

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Apparel workers in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (KFTZ), near Sri Lanka's international airport, are facing a dire situation as COVID-19 continues to infect employees in the zone.

High unemployment and worsening economic problems push hundreds of young men and women from remote rural districts every year into low-paid jobs in factories such as Smart Shirts, Star Garments, Next Manufacturing, MAS Holdings and Brandix that supply apparel to giant global retailers.

KFTZ workers have faced severe hardship since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Following a brief lockdown March 2020, the government reopened the economy in response to the demands of apparel factory owners who then imposed higher production targets even as the deadly disease spread through the island.

In late October 2020, 567 of Brandix's 1,394 employees at its Minuwangoda garment plant near Katunayake tested positive for the virus. It was later revealed that factory management had compelled these employees to keep working even when they had COVID symptoms.

Hundreds of workers were subsequently found to be infected with the deadly virus at apparel factories across the country. While some plants were temporarily closed many workers were not paid wages or only received half of their usual pay.

President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's cash-strapped government is highly dependent on exports, particularly garments, to earn foreign exchange. The apparel industry employs nearly 15 percent of the national labor force, directly or indirectly, according to the Joint Apparel Association Forum. These workers contribute about 7 percent of the country's gross domestic product. One recent report estimates that the KFTZ is

now employing about 350,000 workers.

FTZ Manufacturers Association Secretary Dhammika Fernando told last weekend's *Sunday Times* that absenteeism in the zone was normally 5 percent but that this had increased under the impact of rising COVID-19 infections.

The Rajapakse government has declared that Sri Lankans must "live with the virus" as the "new normal." In line with big business profit demands, if several workers are found to be infected, a factory does not close. Management just shuts down the section of the plant where there were infections.

A garment worker from a leading KFTZ plant recently told WSWs reporters that COVID-19 virus infections were being discovered in almost every factory in the zone.

"I returned to work recently after having to quarantine because I was infected. Even though large numbers of workers at our factory are already infected, management continuously pushes us to reach targets," she said. "Management, however, is hiding the real numbers regarding the spread of the virus."

The company she works for has three factories in the zone, with infected workers in every plant. "I was infected when one infected worker was removed and I replaced her. There are 23 on our line and all but three were infected. I had 10 days off but now the infected workers are only allowed seven days off work, due to recently announced government regulations. You have to work even if you're not fit. The government and the administration think only of profits," she said.

"Those infected aren't even provided with a suitable place to quarantine. As soon as I felt discomfort in my body, I took an antigen test and discovered that I was infected but had to go home using public transport.

"I went to my lodgings and told them that I was going

home to my village. I later learned that the woman who owned the house, and four members of her family, had contracted the disease because of that moment of exposure. My thinking is that factories should be closed for some time,” she said, “because a large number of lives are at risk.

“Manpower [daily hire] workers flock to [the KFTZ] every morning searching for work but usually don’t get work every day. They’re paid 1,000 (\$US5) or 1,200 rupees per day. There were very young women who came all the way from Jaffna [370 kilometres away]. It’s sad to see,” she continued.

“I’ve only been in the service for three years. I did not join a trade union. One day during the pandemic, a union representative came to the factory. She never came back and there was no one to look into our problems.

“When the country was closed due to the pandemic [in early 2020], we only received half of our wages, i.e., 9,000 rupees, but still had to pay the same lodging fees. During this time, the militant workers were also fired, subject to compensation. Removing these workers who had long years of service was a loss to us,” she said.

The government says vaccination alone will not work, she continued. “I got two shots but the third vaccine has not yet been given to us. Those who received the third vaccine, however, also became infected.”

Explaining the harsh working conditions, she said, “Our basic salary is 21,400 rupees. We earn extra money by doing tiresome work. I work from 9.30 a.m. to 7.30 p.m. Staff shortages mean that our workloads are high. Having worked on the three holidays in January, the exhaustion contributed to me getting infected.

“Our salaries are not enough to live on. I support my mother and unmarried sister. I also have an unmarried daughter and have to look after her. We live in small rooms and pay around 4,500 rupees to rent a room, another 500 rupees for electricity. We cook our meals. There are only two toilets for 20 people. These conditions are well suited for spread of the pandemic.”

WSWS reporters explained that governments around the world were opening up economies, focusing on profit rather than workers’ safety, and the purpose of the Global Workers Inquest launched by the WSWS.

The KFTZ worker responded by praising the WSWS initiative and voiced her willingness to submit information to the inquest. “I’m proud to take such a step,” she said and added, “After I return I will arrange more workers to meet with you.”

A young female worker from the Star Garments factory in the KFTZ also spoke to the WSWS. Originally from Galgamuwa, [100 kilometres from Colombo] she has worked in the company’s sewing division for five years. The factory employs about 800 employees and her line has 60 workers.

“Even with the booster vaccine, we can’t escape the coronavirus,” she said. “At our factory, even those who received the second vaccine dose were infected with this disease. Although the [sewing] machines are placed at a distance, the social distancing cannot be maintained during working hours because it is necessary to meet up with the fellow workers from time to time.

“This disease, which has spread globally, is not likely to be controlled in Sri Lanka and people are also coming in from abroad,” she said, noting that governments around the world, including Sri Lanka, had not taken any steps to control the disease. After a discussion on the purpose of the Global Workers Inquest, she added, “I appreciate such an initiative.”



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