

From Asia/ India

Harsh working conditions....

The National Campaign on Labour Rights (NCLR), India—a network of trade unions and other support groups—has initiated a campaign to highlight the exploitative conditions of work faced by women workers in fish processing plants in India. We carry the letter written by NCLR to the Union Ministry of Labour, India.

We are a group of trade unions, NGOs, and concerned citizens who have been monitoring the developments in the fish and seafood processing industry, particularly from the perspective of labour rights. We have conducted a number of studies to gather in-depth information about labour conditions in this sector and we have come to a conclusion that the situation in this regard appears to be alarming, to say the least. We wish to convey our observations through this letter and also to establish communication with your association on this issue.

We are aware that over the last few years, marine food products have come to occupy an important position among India's exports and, consequently, are a major source of foreign exchange so vital to India's economy. We also appreciate the new employment opportunities it has opened for the workforce. However, we are dismayed to note that not only have the gains of the sector's phenomenal growth not percolated down to the workers employed therein, but that the situation of the latter remains no better than that of bonded labourers.

The industry is almost completely run on the basis of young migrant women workers who are employed either on contract or piece-rate basis. The factory owners disclaim any responsibility for the workers on the pretext that the latter are the responsibility of not them but the contractors. As a matter of fact, this is in complete violation of the Contract Labour Act, which holds that the ultimate responsibility of the workers lies with the principal employer.

It has been observed that the living conditions of the workers are inhuman and highly oppressive. Around 40 to 50 women are provided with one hall which generally has just a couple of bathrooms. These dwelling units, usually located atop or beside the processing unit, are also characterized by extremely unhygienic conditions and a lack of sanitary facilities.

Living in such proximity to the processing unit also exposes the workers to hazardous substances and chemical leaks.

You may be aware that a strict surveillance is maintained over the women workers in the fish processing industry and they are not allowed to go outside the factory premise or their place of accommodation. A total control over the lives of the women workers is an important characteristic of this industry. It's a virtual confinement for them where they live like bonded labour.

The workers are made to work from 8 am to 8 pm with just a one-hour lunch break and a half-hour tea break. In peak season, workers are often forced to work beyond the normal 12 hours. Also, paying them extremely low wages is the norm rather than the exception, and a large number of units don't even pay their workers the legally-stipulated minimum wages. In a study conducted by Centre for Education and Communication (CEC), it was revealed:

- In Mumbai, 20 workers out of 50 get less than Rs1,500 per month.
- In Mangalore, most of the workers earned between Rs900 to 1,200, peaking to Rs2,000 in some busy months. At the same time, there are also months when the income dips to the level of Rs500.
- In Tuticorin, in the sample of 47 it was found that 34 got up to a maximum of Rs1,500 and 18 of them got below the prescribed minimum wage.
- In Calcutta, out of a sample of 32 workers, 14 were found to get below Rs1,000. On the higher side, it was found that seven got more than Rs.2,000.

The working conditions in these units are very harsh. The workers are made to work without any protection. This renders the workers highly susceptible to common diseases like malaria, chickenpox, and jaundice. Peeling and handling frozen material over long periods of time leads to the skin of the palms developing rashes and even peeling off. If this remain untreated for long, it may develop serious infections. These may even compel the affected workers to leave the job. It also transpires that employers do not provide any medical facilities. Such a practice is questionable even from the point of view of expediency, since the health of the workers has a direct bearing on the hygienic quality of the product and, consequently, its saleability in the

international market.

The above are only some of the most glaring problems characterizing this industry. We would like your ministry to respond to the issue of labour rights in this sector and come out with a fact sheet on this issue so that we can initiate a dialogue on it. This is extremely important for an export-oriented industry because it also has to be internationally accountable for the labour right records. As you know, this sector is already being internationally monitored for hygiene of the product and environmental impact. It has also faced sanctions in the past due to these reasons. Hence, it would also be in the interest of the processing industry and national economy to improve labour conditions in this sector.

We hope your ministry would look into the specific issues raised by us and take stern steps to effectively enforce the relevant labour laws in this sector. In particular, we request you to organize a tripartite meeting (i.e. between representatives of the workers, the industry and the Government) with a view to evolve mechanisms to address issues regarding the fish-and seafood-processing industry, such as the constitution of a welfare board for its workers.

(More information about this campaign is available from cec@nda.vsnl.net.in)