

**Seminar
on
Experiences in Organising Garment Workers**

WSF 2004

A Brief Report

Organised by Centre for Education and Communication (CEC), Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), Social Awareness and Voluntary Education (SAVE), Thai Labour Campaign and We in the Zone, in partnership with Oxfam GB

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World Social Forum, Mumbai 2004

The fourth annual edition of World Social Forum (WSF 2004) that took place in Mumbai, India from January 16 - 21, 2004 brought together more than a hundred thousand people representing social movements, trade unions, academics and NGOs around the world, who believed that "Another World Is Possible", the slogan of WSF.

The World Social Forum was conceived as an international forum against neo-liberal policies and capitalist led globalization. The first WSF was held in January 2001, in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil. It was timed to coincide with the holding of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

While in Davos powerful transnational corporations, political leaders and international economic bureaucracy charted the course of neo-liberal global agenda, the WSF provided *"...an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and inter-linking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society centred on the human person"*.

The next World Social Forum will be in Porto Alegre, Brazil, before it goes to Africa in 2006.

Preface

In different countries, trade unions and other grass root organisations have been involved in organising garment workers. Some of these efforts have been successful, while many others were suppressed or confronted with relocation of the industry to other countries where workers are not organised. Seminar on 'Experiences in Organising Garment Workers', held on January 17, 2004 during the World Social Forum in Mumbai, looked at the organising strategies employed in different countries, which have led to an improvement in working and living conditions of garment workers and their collective strength. It also examined the nature of their organisation, their national as well as international linkages and their effectiveness in making political impact at the respective governmental levels. The seminar was jointly organised by Centre for Education and Communication (CEC), New Delhi; Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), Europe; Social Awareness and Voluntary Education (SAVE), Tirupur; Thai Labour Campaign, Thailand and We in the Zone, Sri Lanka. This was done in partnership with Oxfam GB.

In the seminar, 'Experiences in Organising Garment Workers' representatives of organisations from many countries shared their experiences and strategies in organising garment workers. They analysed their successes and failures and emphasised current trends and challenges. The seminar was divided into three Panels: the first panel was on Organising Migrant Garment Workers; the second on Gender Issues in Organising and the third on International Campaigning to Support Workers Organising.

The opening testimony was given by a group of women garment workers from Bangalore co-ordinated by Cividep-India.

Speakers in the first panel made presentations on conditions of migrant workers in garment industry. They focused on their experiences in attempting to organise them and outlined critical issues that could be taken into consideration for the same. Successful organising strategies and ways in which international campaigning organisations could lend support to local organising efforts were also discussed. The chair for the panel was J John, Executive Director, CEC and speakers were Than Doke who spoke on Burmese workers in Mae Sot, Thailand, Kimi Lee from Garment Workers Centre, who spoke on Asian and Latin workers in Los Angeles, U.S. and P K Ganguli, Centre of Indian Trade Unions, India who spoke on the condition of garment workers in India.

In the second panel, speakers discussed gender aspects of garment workers' mobilising efforts, taking into consideration the predominance of women workers in garment industry. It examined the need for prioritising women workers' needs and how gender should be taken into account when developing strategies to organise workers. Another issue discussed was the problems of women workers in the informal economy, where they also form the majority and are particularly vulnerable to rights violations and organising is most difficult. The speakers included Mashuda Khatun Shefali of the Bangladesh Garment Workers Protection Alliance, Bangladesh and Junya Lek Yimprasert, of the Thai Labour Campaign, Thailand. Rohini Hensmen chaired the panel.

In the third panel, speakers talked about how the garment workers' organisations network with other trade unions and labour rights organisations. They also shared their concerns in international networking and solidarity building. Speakers included Manoka who represented Bed and Bath Campaign, Thailand, Nina Ascoly of the International Secretariat of Clean Clothes Campaign, Netherlands, Dae-Oup Chang of Asian Trans National Corporation Network, Hong Kong and Anton Marcus of Free Trade Zone

Workers Union, Sri Lanka. Nikki Bas of Sweatshop Watch, United States, chaired the session.

In the closing session Dr. Duarte Baretto summed up the key issues raised during the presentations and discussions in the three panels.

The seminar brought together people working in the garment industry from different parts of the world and promoted sharing of experiences and important learnings among various initiatives in organising garment workers. The countries that were represented included Austria, Bangladesh, Canada, China, France, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Namibia, Nepal, Netherlands, Pakistan, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Thailand and United States. The seminar provided an opportunity for activists and campaigners from different countries to learn from each other, the strategies in organising garment workers. Another important outcome of the seminar was that it provided a platform for Indian garment workers to interact with a global audience. The garment workers and trade unionists from India were from different states including Assam, Gujrat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, New Delhi, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal.

I acknowledge the contribution of Pallavi Mansingh, Programme Officer, CEC in facilitating and coordinating the seminar on garment workers.

J John
Executive Director
Centre for Education and Communication

Opening

A Aloysius from Social Awareness and Voluntary Education (SAVE), welcomed the participants and introduced the theme of the seminar. He said that the main aim of the seminar was to understand the experiences in organising garment workers from different parts of the world. SAVE is a non profit and non governmental action group, primarily working for the realisation of sole rights of children and women for nine years.

The opening session of the seminar included testimonies from garment workers. This was co-ordinated by Gopinath from Civil Initiative for Development and Peace (CIVIDEP)-India, an NGO based in Bangalore. He said that another world for garment workers was possible if there was greater collaboration between grass roots activists and international agencies.

Ratna, a helper in a garment unit in Bangalore stated that garment workers in Bangalore got very limited facilities at their workplace. Wages were also very meagre. Average income for helpers who are the lowest category of workers was Rs. 700 per month. The income of a checker was Rs 1000 and that of a tailor Rs 2000 a month. "Out of the pittance we get we have to support our families. Job security and social security is completely lacking in the kind of job we do. This is true for the entire industry," she said.

Working hours were also very strictly monitored. Ratna said that if women in the factory where she worked were late even by five minutes, they were turned away and when there were orders to be finished they had to work up late hours, sometimes even through the night but they were never paid overtime.

“We never get any overtime pay no matter how much we work. Instead we are threatened that we will be fired if we are late”, said Jayshree, a worker in a garment unit in Bangalore. Now however, they are getting a lot of help from women’s organisation. That has helped in enhancing their capacity to fight. “We have even managed to get the authorities to inspect the factory. This has helped us in reducing harassments of various kinds within the office premises. But despite our best efforts, wages and overtime continue to remain a problem,” she added.

“We will be fired if we refuse overtime,” she said. She explained that there was a lot of harassment by production managers at her workplace. However there were organising efforts taking place and the workers were able to constitute a women’s commission, which worked with the labour commission and inspectorate and eventually some improvements had been made. Harassment had decreased, but there were still problems regarding wages and overtime, Jayashree reported. “This little bit of improvement needs to spread throughout Bangalore.”

Panel I

Organising Migrant Garment Workers

Chair: J John, Executive Director, CEC

Speakers: Than Doke, Burmese Labour Solidarity Organisation (BLSO), Thailand

Kimi Lee, Garment Workers Centre, US

P K Ganguly, Centre of Indian Trade Unions, India



Than Doke, of the BLSO, which organises Burmese migrant workers in Thailand explained that in the 1980s there was a large influx of labour in Thailand due to poverty in Burma. Explaining the working conditions of Burmese migrant garment workers in garment factories in Thailand he said that workers had to work from 8 am until 10 pm. Sometimes it extended up to midnight. It could also extend to seven days a week.

Wages the workers received were US\$ 50 for 70 hours a week, which is much below the legal minimum wage. Factories continue to abuse human rights. Employers were able to take advantage of the fear and the lack of knowledge that migrant workers have of their own rights and thus exploit them. He called for strong cooperation for NGOs and trade unions to counter this.

Than Doke also emphasised that the major problem in the process of organising workers in the garment sector in Thailand was the powerful link that existed between government and the capitalists who network against the unionising process.



Kimi Lee, an organiser with the Garment Workers Centre noted that Los Angeles was the largest garment manufacturing district in California with 5000 factories. Los Angeles, California had the first largest garment industry in the United States. Workers worked 10-12 hours but they earned less than what was required to live on in the United States. Most of the workers were undocumented. Employers threatened to deport them. This happened despite the fact that labour laws were applicable to undocumented migrant workers, though they are usually unaware of this; they are entitled to such rights as the minimum wage. Unions were not interested in organising these workers because they did not speak the same language – 75 per cent were from Latin America, 15 per cent from Asia and most were women. Less than one per cent of the workers are a part of unions.

Kimi Lee further noted that a Garment Workers Centre had been opened a few years ago to help empower migrant workers in LA's garment industry. There were 2 million undocumented workers in the Los Angeles area; about 100,000 immigrant workers were employed in the Los Angeles garment industry. The Garment Workers Centre organised educational workshops for workers on issues such as their rights in terms of wages and hours, undertook leadership development, and were campaigning heavily for the legalisation of undocumented workers. She said that these workers expected to lose their jobs when the Multifibre Arrangement (MFA) would be phased out at the end of the year. In the last ten years, 50000 jobs had been lost due to NAFTA.

Kimi Lee also mentioned that there was need to raise awareness among employers of their responsibilities regarding working conditions and labour rights and also to educate consumers.



P K Ganguly noted that in India the garment industry was one of the most globalised industries in India employing about 3.5 million workers. According to the Ministry of Commerce 51 per cent of the total textiles exports were from the garment sector alone. Nearly 80 per cent of these exports went to the U.S. and E.U., It is seen that the sector is a victim of the murkiest drama on the stage of trade politics.

The Indian clothing and garment exports face quota restrictions under the cover of the Multifiber Arrangement (MFA), which had governed trade in textile and garments from 1974-94, placing quotas on textiles and garments exported to Europe and North America. The new Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC) arrived at in Marrakesh in 1994, which put a 10-year plan into force that would culminate in the phasing out of all the MFA quotas by January 2005.

Developed countries were hoping that under the WTO's "quota free" and "free trade" regime exports by developing countries will increase. In reality, P K Ganguly said that trade had never been "free" in the world and under the WTO regime too it would not become free. As experience goes, there would be several barriers for exports like anti-dumping, safeguards and protectionism by the advanced countries primarily the United States.

He further pointed that as a precursor to the full-fledged ATC (WTO) regime, there was all round isolation of workers' rights. Even the minimum standards set by the ILO were violated, namely, Freedom of Association and Right to Collective Bargaining (Conventions 87 & 98), Determination of Minimum Wage, Employment Security and so on. A similar and grossly negative picture gets projected regarding implementation of labour laws, social security measures, health, medicare, safety, occupational health diseases, working women's demands etc.

About the role of CITU he said that the CITU unions in the garment sector, both in the export-oriented units and in the non-export oriented units mobilised workers on all the above issues and make continuous efforts to unite all the trade unions to take actions against the WTO and the globalised economy, including strike actions. CITU strongly believes that another world is possible and that is socialism.

Interventions

N P Samy of National Centre for Labour (NCL), which is an apex body of independent labour organisations working for the unorganised sector of labour in India registered in the Trade Union Act 1926, pointed out that the garment sector in India was increasing in numbers and exploitation also was rampant.

He said that there was a clear nexus between politicians and employers in India. The ruling parties in India wanted quick collection of funds. They ordered labour inspectors to collect money from owners of garment units. Hence there was a situation where the employers violated the law of the land and yet continued to flourish in business having paid money to the ruling elite.

Another point raised by N P Samy was that the garment industry had become a regular supplier of girls to the flesh trade. There were systematic methods of pushing young girls working in the garment industry into prostitution. One common method was that the employers pushed girls, who were the only earning members in their family, into taking loans and when they were unable to pay it back in time, they were forced to take such jobs to pay them off.

J Sorel of Federation of Consumer Organisations - Tamil Nadu reiterated the fact that there were plenty of loopholes in Indian labour laws.



J John, Executive Director, Centre for Education and Communication summing up the session said that from the presentations it was clear that the garment workers were generally migrant women workers. The cases presented on the Thai garment factories dealt with cross border migrants from Burma and also international migrants were mostly young women from impoverished rural areas. The fact of being migrant workers exposes them to severe vulnerabilities.

He noted that militarism was also a factor in the exploitation of workers in Burma as well as Thailand. He also noted how changes in the ATC would adversely affect the workers in the garment sector, pressing countries into pushing labour wages down further to deal with the increasing competition that the phasing out of the quotas would bring about.

Panel II

Gender Issues and Worker Organising

Chair: Rohini Hensmen, Women Working Worldwide, India

Speakers: Mashuda Khatun Shefali, Bangladesh Garment Workers Protection Alliance, Bangladesh

Junya Lek Yimprasert, Thai Labour Campaign, Thailand

Rohini Hensmen noted that this was an important session and that the challenge of organising workers from a gender perspective was an issue that must be taken seriously. The majority of garment workers in many places were women, but often apart from noting the fact the gender impact of this was not adequately addressed.

Shefali, from Bangladesh Garment Workers Protection Alliance, which works for the cause of garment workers in Bangladesh, pointed to the fact that as



export-oriented garment production has been pursued there has been a noticeable feminisation of the workforce. She saw it as a positive development in getting women to earn an income, however the working conditions were quite bad. Women were seen as a cheap source of labour and thus tended to get employment in

this industry, but being vulnerable they also became easy targets of exploitation. They were forced to work long hours in lengthy and labourious jobs. Though the sector provided employment and income to women, the negative part of it was that women were not aware of their legal rights. In Bangladesh out of 3,500 garment factories, just two were unionised. Shefali

noted that women garment workers bore a double burden of job and home. She outlined a number of gendered workplace concerns, for example health and safety problems. Occupations affect women's health differently. Pregnant women were either forced to leave their jobs or fired before they have their babies, losing their income, instead of getting paid maternity leave to which they are legally entitled. Another safety issue with a gender dimension is transport to and from work: women were often attacked or raped on their way to work, they were also subjected to sexual harassment at workplace. Many trade unions were not addressing women issues, she said. Child care was an important issue that was not being addressed and women lost work when they had children.

The MFA phase out too has a gender dimensions, noted Shefali. Since women formed the majority in the sector in Bangladesh they would be impacted the most by any associated changes, particularly job loss. For women losing their jobs sometimes meant losing their husbands as well, since their men did not want wives who did not earn an income and could not contribute to the household expenses. In Bangladesh several factories had already closed down.

Connecting the need for a gender analysis of workers' concerns to the needs of migrant workers raised in the previous session, Shefali reported that 90 percent of Bangladesh's 1.8 million garment workers were women and that 90 percent of them were migrants from rural areas. Therefore safe, decent and affordable housing was an important issue. Her organisation had opened a shelter for migrant workers

Shefali informed that her organisation had six centres for 600 workers and over the last ten years they had mobilised stakeholders. In the hostels they provided to the workers basic education and training and the curriculum

also included knowledge on gender and labour laws. Initially the training was only for women workers but later it was extended to trade unions. Since 2002 their organisation had also been involved in sensitising garment workers about the possible implications of the phase-out of the MFA.

Junya Lek from the Thai Labour campaign, a Thai run non-profit, non-governmental organisation committed to promoting workers' rights in Thailand and increasing awareness of labour issues globally, noted that everyone at



the World Social Forum believed that another world is possible. "This", she said, "means that happiness is possible for women."

Junya Lek further explained that women were not happy in today's world. Garment and textile industry put together employed 25 per cent of women today. They worked 13 hours in China, Hong Kong, Thailand and in many other parts of the globe. She then requested the garment workers and all those related to them including their families, trade unions, academics, media and consumers of their toil, among the audience to stand up and join hands. They were then asked "Do you want to fight alone? Do you want to win? Do you want to believe that you will not fight alone? Together we can make a difference. Corporations say that without us you die. It is true that without corporations some die but with corporations many die."

She further said that during the era of international labour campaign, most codes of conduct and international labour standards were still violated, saying that that happened, as the existing system divided workers and created distinctions between Indian and Chinese workers for example. Factories were closed down in one country if there were attempts at unionisation and moved to other countries but suffering continues to exist. Calling for international

solidarity in the labour rights movement, Junya Lek stressed that the tendency to play workers of one country against those of another should not be allowed.

Interventions

Janaki Rani a garment factory checker and a member of the MLF union pointed out that due to the efforts of the union she had all benefits that workers were entitled to, benefits like medical facilities were given and she was even on good terms with her employer.

Palani from CITU said that their union had been fighting for the rights of women garment workers but success was limited as most of the women were migrants and especially feared losing their jobs.

D Ranganathan an activist with construction workers pointed out that in Bangalore garment workers did not have basic amenities like drinking water and toilets. They were forced into prostitution. They saw no future for their children, as they could not even send them to government schools.

Sophia a garment worker from Bangalore said that they were denied bonuses and got only 15 days off in a year. They had to commute long distances and worked from early morning till late in the night, adding that she and her colleagues had no knowledge of the labour department and how it could help them.

Desai of Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) noted that workers protests were going on vigorously in many places like the Mumbai Century Mill workers who recently went on hunger strike. Housing was also becoming a major issue for workers.

Summing up the panel Rohini Hensmen made three crucial points. Firstly she emphasised that a lot of garment workers were working in the informal



economy. Practically 100 per cent of home workers in Mumbai, for example, were women. They had no proof of employment and could be dismissed as soon as they tried to unionise. They could not fight back without a proof of employment in hand. So some form of identity or registration was very important for them to fight for their rights.

Secondly, Rohini recapitulated that in free trade zones there was no facility for women workers to live with families. They live in boarding houses and had to leave when they wished to start a family. There was no provision for childcare, whereas according to ILO conventions both parents should have the option of parental care and leave. Finally she said that job security was very important. These gender issues had to be taken seriously.



Panel III

International Campaigning to Support Workers Organising

Chair: Nikki Bas, Sweatshop Watch, United States

Speakers: Manoka, Bed and Bath Campaign, Thailand

Nina Ascoly, International Secretariat of Clean Clothes Campaign, Netherlands

Dae-Oup Chang, Asian Trans National Corporation Network, Hong Kong

Anton Marcus, Free Trade Zone Workers Union, Sri Lanka.



Nina Ascoly recalled that the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) started about a decade ago when a group of Dutch activists found out about violations in a Philippines factory that produced garments for a Dutch retailer. Workers asked the activists to take some action and street demonstrations were taken out and out of that the CCC was born. Today they are campaigns in 11 different countries in Europe and each one is made up of a coalition of organisations including trade unions and NGOs.

Explaining the work of CCC Nina Ascoly said that CCC worked to raise awareness on the conditions in the industry, mobilise consumers to use this knowledge for change and to pressurise companies to take responsibility for their production throughout the network. Many times the CCC is faced with

questions like why is there a need to put pressure on the companies because in export factories conditions might still be better than in the ones not producing for export. She explained that it was important to realise that the export companies have a chain of suppliers and maybe that at one level the condition was good but then it was not the same at all levels. There was also large-scale informalisation, and workers in the informal economy were particularly vulnerable to rights violations. It was important that companies take responsibility throughout their supply networks. The CCC responded to individual cases of rights violation in factories, but also tried to develop systematic solutions to the problems in the sector.

Other areas of CCC activity Nina Ascoly said were lobbying for legislation and work on international solidarity actions through the campaign's urgent appeal networks. When some terrible violation had occurred and workers or their organisations requested urgent international help, the network swung into action (for example the CCC took up the case of the Shree Jee fire in Agra, India in which 44 people died). Two cases that the CCC was involved in were the Jakalanka case and the Bed and Bath case, which she left to the other speakers to elaborate on.

In 2001 the CCC identified the right to organise as a top priority that must be taken up in all CCC activities. This for example would be a priority theme in the upcoming Olympics Campaign that pressures the sportswear brands sponsoring the Olympics to adopt ethical sourcing practices.

In 2001 the informal economy was also identified as an issue needing more attention and the need for better support to women in the garment industry's informal economy.

Anton Marcus, General Secretary of the Free Trade Zone Workers Union (FTZWU) the first union to come up in the FTZs in Sri Lanka, spoke about the



case of the Jakalanka factory in Sri Lanka where 362,000 workers worked. It was located in the FTZs and 80 per cent of the workers were women. The factory was supplying garments for Nike, Columbia, and VK. A union was formed in the factory last April. It was challenged by the management to get a 40 per

cent vote in a referendum in order to be granted recognition. In the process the management started an intimidation campaign to prevent workers from voting in support of the union. Despite the presence of international observers, brought in at the request of the union, the anti-union campaign was so severe that only 70 (out of 210) union members voted for the union in the July 9 referendum. The management declared that the union had lost but the union continued to demand that the management recognise it. Rights violations that had taken place in the time leading up to the referendum. CCC, ITGLWF, War on Want, and ICFTU also raised this issue with the management and the companies sourcing at Jakalanka.

Anton Marcus said that the Jakalanka case was taken as a test case in the wake of the fact that the government of Sri Lanka had applied for Generalised System of Preferences, GSP Status in America and EU. Complaints were made to the EU and America saying that the Government of Sri Lanka had been violating labour rights especially the right to unionise in the FTZs. After a six-month campaign the Fair Labour Association, of which Nike and Columbia were a part, had to intervene. Even at the Cancun meeting of the WTO efforts were made to lobby Sri Lankan ministers in relation to this case. Finally the FLA came to Sri Lanka and facilitated negotiations with management. The union was eventually recognised and an agreement was signed. Thus citing the example Anton Marcus said that by working together it was possible to develop a rights-based work approach and change the conditions of garment workers.



Manoka, a former worker with the Bed and Bath, a Thai garment factory producing for such brands as Nike, Levi Strauss, Adidas and Reebok, Thailand, recalled that the Bed and Bath factory closed down without any notice in October 2002. At that time there was no union in the factory. The Bed and Bath workers went to the Thai Labour Campaign for help.

They proceeded to occupy the compound of the ministry of labour for three months in the hope that they would get help from the government and the international labour community. There was tremendous outpouring of solidarity action from the international labour rights community who sent solidarity messages to the workers and letters of concern to the companies involved.

She further said that when the protest ended successfully and they received compensation. The workers realised that they had suffered enough exploitation. They started a cooperative and began producing for unions. After one year the workers initiated their own brand. The fight of the Bed and Bath workers was not for survival but for rights of the workers, to establish the fact that workers could run a factory.



Dae-Oup Chang of the Asian Trans National Corporation Network, Hong Kong, which is involved in monitoring Asian trans-national corporations and protecting workers rights stated, that to many people, the work of the ATNC Network could sound strange, since corporations were usually associated with the West. Asian TNCs however were growing, and Asian

employers had a huge influence. In 1990 the investment flow from Asia was \$11.4 billion, in 1997 \$50 billion, and in 2000 \$80 billion. Many ATNCs

were small in size and the amount of investment was low but the number of employees was very large and this was also the case in the garment sector. Their impact could be felt in the garment industry, where many Taiwanese and South Koreans owned factories. They were suppliers for western brand name companies and direct employers of Asian workers. Though ATNCs could be located at the bottom of the supply chain, Dae-Oup explained that they still earned a lot of money. About their work he said that they had been working with 11 organisations and NGOs spread in eight countries across Asia. These included AMRC, Protest Toyota Campaign, and CEC.

Interventions

Muttukumaraswami of MLF said through his experience in this sector that workers arbitrarily lost their jobs without any notice. Codes of Conduct were becoming a problem to comply with at the factory level. Orders slowly shifted to different factories. The garment industry was shifting from one country to another so the question was whether everybody could unite and protect themselves.

Manohar, trade unionist and former garment worker noted that many people worked in this industry from a young age. There were agreements between the buyers and retailers regarding wages and overtime but they were never implemented. While workers could not even afford three adequate meals in a day, their employers managed to get new cars and houses.

S Kumar of Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) noted that often the government promoted fundamentalist groups that worked against the unionisation process. He said that his union had had one such experience when they had tried to unionise in a garment unit where most of the workers were young migrant girls working in deplorable conditions.

Hasan Akhtar associated with the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER) from Karachi stated that in Pakistan the working conditions in garment factories were very bad. Migrants from Bangladesh worked in pathetic conditions. Working women who had migrated from Afghanistan were also greatly exploited and sexual harassment was rampant. Working hours extended up to 12 or even 16 hours per day during peak production times. Wages were low and labour laws were regularly violated. Activists were working on a campaign against the Industrial Relation Ordinance 2002. The ordinance would make conditions in garment industry worse.

Nela Perle from Frauensolidaritaet, an organization that participated in the Austrian CCC noted that prior to the World Social Forum she had visited several garment production units in India including small, big, and home-based workplaces. She noted that most workers were women and felt that the most important thing for women was to unionise.



Nikki Bas summing up the session said that the condition of garment workers could be improved by targeting the buyers. International networks and groups like the ATNCs CCC and Sweatshop Watch could play a very important role.

Closing



Dr. Duarte Barreto from Fedina said that one thing that struck him was the whole question of garment workers being a part of the informal sector. Very few were in the formal sector or organised. Informality also meant vulnerability, which caused difficulty in organised action.

The volume of workers in the informal sector in India is huge with only 7-8 per cent in the formal sector. He noted that all the speakers spoke of the increasing feminisation of the workforce. Working conditions were bad, salaries were low, and there was tremendous job insecurity among the work force. Another striking thing he said was the nexus between the industry and the state in all the advanced countries.

Dr. Duarte noted that the speakers had discussed organisation at the grassroots level and the roles of trade unions and other organisations. He noted that organisations had not particularly responded sufficiently to women's needs and that there was greater difficulty in organising women workers but he encouraged unions to consider this.

Dr. Duarte also noted that international campaigns, such as the CCC and others, had put in tremendously. He noted that such solidarity campaigns were successful if organisation at the local level was strong. Dr. Duarte invited everybody to start mobilising workers from wherever they were. He urged participants to develop a variety of approaches, acknowledging the case of the Bed and Bath workers in Thailand who started a cooperative, but noted that one strategy was not the best for all and it could not be duplicated everywhere.

Junya Lek advised the audience that campaigns such as the Clean Clothes Campaign and the Thai Labour Campaign, and organisations such as CEC,

were tools to help them and urged them not to be passive, instead to take action for change

The session concluded with a song from Garment Workers, which conveyed the need to fight back.



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