

138 bonded (child) labourers found working in spinning mills in Tamil Nadu

Indian garment industry claims to be free of child labour

October 22, 2012

On Monday 15 October 2012 Tamil Nadu government officials raided a spinning mill in Erode district in Tamil Nadu and rescued 77 bonded (child) labourers of which 14 were younger than the legal minimum age to work in a factory, which is 14 years. However, engaging children up to 18 under hazardous work or against their will is also a violation of the Indian law. The labourers were made to work 12 hour shifts, against the 8 hour norm. They had received a 10,000 Indian Rupee advance when they started to work and now had to repay that amount. For several months the workers, including the children, who live in hostels were not allowed to visit their homes.

The raid was instigated by NGOs that work under the banner of the Tirupur People's Forum (TPF), a network of 41 NGOs located at 26 districts of Tamil Nadu, who brought the issue of child labour and bonded labour to the attention of the government of Erode district.

The India Committee of the Netherlands (ICN) has been working with the TPF to raise the issue of bonded labour in the garment industry with Western garments brands who source from the region, the Dutch government and consumers.

The day after the raid on Monday 61 more children were found. The unit holder of a spinning mill in the same district who was 'caught' with the children in a temple, testified he was bringing the children home after the raid of the day before, fearing action against the unit. He claimed not to be aware of the children's ages. It turned out 22 children were below 14.

On the 20th of October the TPF issued a press release stating that *'there are 200000 girls working as bonded labourers under Sumangali Scheme (camp coolie system). Most of them are less than 18 years and many even less than 14 years.'*



The press release continues on the children: *'The children are kept in prison type accommodation, they are forced to work 12 hours a day and they are provided poor quality of food and drinking water. All of them lived in poor sanitary conditions with just two toilets. They are not permitted to communicate with their families and outside world. It is a clear case of bonded labour.'*



Press meet addressed by Mr. S.M. Prithiviraj TPF convener along with Mr. A. Aloysius state organizer CASS, Mr. R. Karuppasamy, Director READ, Erode, Mr. J. Christuraj, Karur & Mr. A. Dass, Salem, Core Committee Members of TPF.

The Tirupur People's Forum demands legal action to be taken against those who forced the children forced to work and a detailed inquiry to understand the labour practices in the mill. Several laws, including Bonded Labour Abolition Act, The Child labour Act and the Juvenile Justice of Children Act have been violated. TPF is also concerned about the rehabilitation of the rescued children. They want them to be issued a 'Release Certificate' under de Bonded Labour Act which entitles them to certain benefits. The fine to be recovered from the 'violators' should be used for safe accommodation, education and skill training of the children.

Recently the US Department of Labour listed the garment sector in India as being a high risk sector for child labour, an accusation strongly denied by Indian garment exporters. The Apparel Export Promotion Council stated that 'the Indian garment industry complied with international laws prohibiting child labour. Among the other products of the US Department of labour list are: carpets, cottonseed, brassware, leather goods, locks, fireworks, silk, stones, bricks and rice.

Sources: 'Only 14 among 27 Saved Are Child Labourers' and '61 More Children Rescued', *The New Indian Express*, 17 October 2012; '77 bonded labourers rescued from Erode textile mill', *The Hindu*, 16 October 2012; 'No child labour in Indian garment industry: AEPC', *Businessline*, 10 October 2012.

See also press release Tirupur People's Forum (TFF): <http://www.indianet.nl/pdf/pb121022.pdf>. And the petition by TPF: <http://www.indianet.nl/pdf/petition121016.pdf>.

See for more information about the Sumangali/Camp Coolie Scheme and the involvement of western companies: http://www.indianet.nl/sumangali_e.html.