

ASIAN LABOUR UPDATE

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Breaking Barriers Building Alliances



Asia-Latin America Women's Exchange Workshop

The aim of the exchange is to strengthen networking and solidarity links between groups in Asia and Latin America. The workshop programme combined three days of factory visits and three days of discussion. Participants came from women's and labour rights groups in Asia, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean as well as from regional and international networks.

Women Workers' Consultation

The exchange started dramatically with the Women Workers' Consultation organised by Movement of Working and Unemployed Women - Maria Elena Cuadra (MEC). This demonstrated MEC's organising ability for the women's movement. About 1,500 maquila women workers were mobilised at the convention centre to finalise proposals for Nicaragua's National Labour Code. It was a Sunday and many women

brought their children with them. Starting from 8 a.m., they were invited to discuss their problems in the Export Processing Zones (EPZ). The women workers talked about their working conditions. For example they need to ask for a coupon to go to the toilet; inspectors perform body checks before hiring them; managers sexually harass the women but accuse them of dressing sexily; chairs are not provided so they must stand all day; after giving birth women workers are given worse jobs than before; no wage slips are provided; wages are regularly paid late. Finally, a woman worker declared, "You have to stand up and defend the rights of your fellow workers."

In the afternoon, the labour minister, lawyers, and trade unionists joined the discussion. Women canvassed their reports and demanded consultation with them before deciding policy. The day's activities

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Cover picture: Globalisation ensures uniformity of factories all over the world. This one is in Nicaragua.

EDITORIAL

EPZs - Exporting women's rights

In July 1999, AMRC hosted an exchange programme between working women and organisers from Asia and Latin America to discuss women working in Export Processing Zones (EPZ) in the two continents.

This year AMRC was invited to a follow-up exchange jointly organised by Latin American women's groups. The meeting took place in Managua, capital of Nicaragua.

Papers from this conference form the basis of this issue of ALU.

Also referred to as Free Trade Zones and Special Economic Zones in Asia, EPZs are known as Maquilas or Maquiladoras in Latin America.

This issue of ALU features working women. EPZs are an obvious place to investigate, as generally around eighty percent of workers there are women.

As an integral part of what is called *globalisation*, the zones are designed to attract foreign investment, by offering tax breaks and officially suspending or simply ignoring local labour laws within the zones, offering capitalists compliant, flexible, and cheap labour.

Neo-liberalism is the ideological system prized by transnational corporations (TNC) under which globalisation is implemented.

Neo-liberalism is changing the framework of agricultural production in Third World countries, forcing people off the land as agricultural capital consolidates into fewer and fewer private hands.

Small farmers deprived of an agricultural living migrate to cities where neo-liberal factory owners offer them exploitative working conditions. Often women who end up in the EPZs are recruited to work in villages by small- and medium-size subcontractors who produce goods for the TNCs. Often the recruiters obtain the consent and assistance of village heads, who screen workers and guarantee their obedience.

For more than eighty years, the International Labour Organisation has compiled 183 labour standards, known as ILO Conventions. It must be stressed

that these are the minimum acceptable conditions to be provided by employers and enforced by local governments. Yet the flood of complaints and routine inspections show that employers and governments systematically ignore them.

Many companies' recruitment procedures for women include a pregnancy test. This speaks volumes for the narrow-minded pursuit of profit, as if they could continue to profit in a childless world. They must recognise that childbirth and rearing children is a basic and collective responsibility for all, including employers.

Employers must remember that accident rates are far higher in factories than they are in farming where these women once worked; factory work is killing and maiming them.

Occupational safety and health standards here must be equally good whether the factory is in First or Third World, and as the feminisation of labour proceeds, it is important that women have special protection for reproductive health.

Some subcontracting factory owners in EPZs now privately admit that contract conditions demanded by TNCs make it impossible to implement ILO Conventions and make a profit.

TNCs play off one country against another to obtain the cheapest labour, constantly reminding workers that if they do not accept the conditions, they will move factories abroad. This is a confidence trick and belies TNC claims to give workers the best conditions possible.

We must confront the bosses' argument that says half a piece of bread is better than none at all. Insufficient pay and dangerous working conditions are unacceptable; if the companies cannot even provide a basic working environment, this indicates that their system of production is uncivilised and needs changing into one that is worker- instead of investor-friendly.

Workers create profit for employers who expect workers to accept half a piece of bread, yet profits of the TNCs are spiralling upwards - no question of them accepting a half slice.