

# Maquila Solidarity update

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## Cambodia: Workers strike for a living wage



**A FIVE-DAY GENERAL STRIKE IN CAMBODIA'S APPAREL SECTOR demonstrates clearly that the country's workers are no longer willing to accept a minimum wage that, despite a recent increase, remains insufficient to meet their basic needs.**

**ABOVE:**  
200,000 Cambodian  
workers walk off  
the job

ON SEPTEMBER 13, OVER 60,000 workers walked off the job demanding that the Garment Manufacturers Association of Cambodia (GMAC) negotiate sector-wide

wage increases with their union federations (the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union - C.CAWDU, and the National Independent

Federation Textile Union of Cambodia - NIFTUC).

By September 15, 200,000 workers from 100 factories were participating in the general strike, according to C.CAWDU.

The strike was sparked by widespread dissatisfaction with a tripartite agreement, negotiated in June, on a new

● see '200,000 Cambodian...', p.8

# Health workshop paints dire picture of workplace injuries

“**W**ORKERS AT MY PLANT experienced serious respiratory problems and continuous headaches because of the solvents we worked with, yet rather than providing us adequate personal protective equipment, management had us wear antistatic suits to protect the sensitive electronic circuits we were producing,” said a member of the Coalition of Workers and Former Employees of the Electronics Industry (CETIEN).

“When workers asked permission to report their cases to IMSS (the Mexican Social Security Institute),” she continued, “they were told to go to the company doctor, who would often prescribe aspirin and send them back to work.”

The four-year veteran of Guadalajara’s electronics industry was speaking at an October workshop in Aguascalientes, Mexico on health issues facing maquila workers and the failure of both companies and the IMSS to deal with chronic health problems.

Lead by Dr. Luis Perez H. Pantoja, a specialist in workplace injuries, the workshop brought together labour rights groups and 18 current and former workers from the electronics and garment sectors in three states to share their experiences and discuss strategies on how to document, report and deal with workplace injuries and illnesses.

According to Dr. Pérez, 80% of workplace injuries in Mexico are not registered. In fact, there are thousands of cases in which workers sustain long-term, debilitating injuries due to unsafe working conditions and do not receive proper treatment.

At the core of the problem are systemic barriers that prevent workers from reporting injuries to IMSS and punish



ABOVE: Dr. Pérez leading the workshop in Aguascalientes, México

them financially with the loss of production bonuses, as well as demotions or outright dismissals, when they do report their injuries.

In order to keep their IMSS premiums from being raised, companies bully and pressure workers to not report injuries. In addition, workers are often misinformed about their legal rights and the procedures to report injuries and illnesses to IMSS and receive no training about how to prevent accidents. Company doctors

often mislead workers about the severity of their injuries or illnesses and tell them their conditions are not severe enough to report to the IMSS clinic. The situation is made worse by what Dr. Pérez describes as an unwritten IMSS rule of rejecting workers’ complaints as work-related and instead diagnosing the problems as personal.

Just as problematic, according to Dr. Pérez, are the low wages paid to maquila workers, as well as the system of paying workers by the piece, which often push them to give up their right to compensation or proper care in order to avoid being off work for long periods of time and miss out on the production bonuses and piece-rate pay that they depend on to survive.

Workers need to learn how to overcome the obstacles created by their employers and the public health institutions in order to report their injuries, said Pérez. “We need a campaign to inform workers that all accidents must be reported to their employer and to IMSS and that they should not accept treatment in private clinics, except when IMSS is aware of it.”

As part of such a campaign, he suggests that workers keep a “health diary” in which they can document everything related to their health and how it is being affected by their work so they can provide documentation to back up claims to IMSS.

The Workplace Health Workshop was co-sponsored by MSN and its local partner in Aguascalientes, Colectivo Raiz. Also participating the workshop were staff and organizers from CETIEN and members of Colectivo Obreras Insumisas, which works in the garment sector in Tehuacan, Puebla. ■

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# IT's my life

Electronics workers protest chronic health threats

**T**HE IRONY OF THE SLOGAN probably would have been lost on delegates to the October 12-15 "IT's my life" International Semiconductor Exhibition in Korea if not for the die-in staged by electronics workers in front of the trade show entrance.

Representing dozens of young workers who have died

from leukemia, melanoma and other cancers after working with toxic chemicals at Samsung factories, the protesters lay still on the ground, their white protective suits covered in bright red flower petals.

**PHOTOS:** Demonstrators stage a "die-in" at the International Semiconductor Exhibition in Korea.

Supporters for the Health and Rights of People in the Semiconductor Industry (SHARPS) has documented 100 cases of cancers and other serious occupational diseases at Samsung factories in Korea. Over thirty workers, some as young as 19, have died. SHARPS is demanding that Samsung disclose the chemicals it is using in the manufacture of its products and cease using harmful substances that threaten workers lives. Samsung has denied responsibility for the deaths and won't reveal the chemicals it is using. It says it is, however, planning a year-long study of the issue.

Sadly, these health and safety threats are not unusual in the global electronics industry. According to a recent report on a factory producing Apple computers in China, over 60 workers were hospitalized for months after using a toxic chemical, N-Hexane, to glue Apple logos on computers. The chemical attacked their nervous systems and eventually made walking difficult.

"I think they knew it [N-Hexane] was poisonous to human bodies, but if they had used another chemical, our

output would not have increased," one woman worker was reported as saying.

The presence of workplace hazards in high-tech industries is well known. The problem, however, is the failure of factory management and international buyers to effectively address and eliminate those hazards.

### International attention

Pressure on Samsung to deal quickly and effectively with the causes of the tragic deaths of workers exposed to toxic chemicals is mounting. The American Public Health Association (APHA) recently announced that Dr. Jeong-ok Kong, an occupational health physician working with SHARPS, will receive one of APHA's annual Occupational Health & Safety Awards this month. Dr. Kong has been working to bring international attention to these cases and to win acknowledgement – and action – from Samsung.

"I don't think I deserve to get [the award]," Dr. Kong said. "But I believe it would encourage my comrades at SHARPS and hope it will be a chance to share and spread our struggle with many others." ■



More info and action: <http://stopsamsung.wordpress.com/>

# Advances

**A**S 2010 COMES TO a close, it's time to review what the international worker rights movement has achieved over the past year.

In a very difficult economic climate, workers and their supporters have won precedent-setting victories on major systemic issues, including freedom of association, irresponsible factory closures, poverty wages, precarious employment and dangerous and unhealthy working conditions.

## Advances and setbacks in the fight for worker rights

Here are some of the major advances, partial victories and setbacks in the fight for worker rights:

**Freedom of Association / Precarious Employment:** Two three-day strikes and an aggressive international solidarity campaign won an agreement allowing 450 workers at a Johnson Controls auto-parts plant in Puebla, Mexico to be represented by the union of their free choice and to rid themselves of a "protection union" imposed on them by their employer. As part of the agreement, workers formerly contracted through a third-party employment agency became direct employees with all the rights and benefits of their co-workers.

**Factory Closures:** With the support of US university students and others, the General Workers' Central of Honduras (CGT) negotiated a precedent-setting agreement with Nike. Under the agreement, 1,500 unemployed workers will receive \$1.5 million in compensation, one-year health coverage and alternative employment opportunities. One year earlier, the workers were abandoned by the owners of two Nike supplier factories who fled the country without providing legal severance pay, back wages or social security benefits.

**Factory Closures / Freedom of Association:** In March, Russell Athletic workers and their supporters celebrated the inauguration of the Jerzees Nuevo Dia (New Day) factory in San Pedro Sula,

Honduras. The 1,200 workers had lost their jobs when their original factory was closed in the midst of first-contract negotiations with their union. When over 100 US and Canadian universities cut or threatened to cut their lucrative licensing agreements with the company, Russell agreed to reemploy the workers at a new unionized factory and to provide them substantial financial compensation. The company also pledged to respect freedom of association at its other factories in the country.

**Wages / Freedom of**

**Association:** A well-organized two-week strike by Honda workers in Foshan, China

achieved significant wage increases of 35-70%. News of the strike sparked similar job actions at auto plants and other factories in a number of provinces. The workers' call for authentic union representation could set the stage for direct elections of union leaders at the factory level in Guangdong province.

**Wages:** With the support of the Worker Rights Consortium, US sportswear manufacturer Knights Apparel opened a model factory in the Dominican Republic where 130 unionized workers making T-shirts and sweatshirts for the US university market are being paid a living wage that is three times the legal minimum.

## Partial Victories

**Wages:** Massive and sometimes violent worker protests in Bangladesh helped achieve a doubling of the legal minimum wage for garment workers. However, the increase does not begin to compensate Bangladeshi workers for the skyrocketing increase in the cost of basic goods. Nor will it be implemented in all factories unless there is considerable pressure on employers to comply with the new law.

**Health and Safety:** Before an international campaign to ban sandblasting in jean laundries was even launched, Levi's and H&M announced plans to eliminate sandblasting in all their supplier facilities. Sandblasting, a finishing process that gives jeans the vintage or "distressed" look, exposes workers to silicosis. However, this and other dangerous practices continue to be common in jean laundries around the world.

## Setbacks

**Freedom of Association / Health and Safety:** After making efforts to improve its labour practices over the past few years, Canadian T-shirt manufacturer Gildan Activewear took two giant steps backward. When workers were organizing a union at its textile factory in the Dominican Republic, Gildan quickly negotiated a collective bargaining agreement with another union that did not represent a majority of the workers at the factory. And after expressing its willingness to cooperate with an inde-

pendent assessment of its new health and safety program in Honduras, the company backed away from that commitment and refused to allow the assessment to go forward.

**Health and Safety:** Factory fires continued to take the lives of garment workers in Bangladesh. In February, 21 workers died in a factory fire at the Garib & Garib Sweater factory in Gazipur because stairways were blocked and exit doors locked. In March, one woman was crushed to

death and 25 injured when workers at the Matrix Sweater factory panicked when a fire alarm went off due to a fluorescent light explosion. Once again, stairways were blocked and there were no emergency exits.

**Freedom of Association:** Labour leaders and worker rights advocates continued to be the targets of government repression in 2010. In Bangladesh, the government responded to garment worker protests by arresting union leaders and labour rights

advocates and cancelling the legal registration of the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity (BCWS). An international campaign has so far secured the release of two imprisoned BCWS staff members. In Cambodia, workers who participated in a general strike for an increase in the legal minimum wage were fired and their leaders face legal threats. In Vietnam, three labour activists were detained and face sentences of 5-15 year prison terms for organizing a strike of 10,000 shoe workers. ■

# Asia-Latina Exchange: Women labour rights activists reconnect in Nicaragua

**WHAT DO WOMEN LABOUR RIGHTS ACTIVISTS from Nicaragua and Korea have in common? Much more than you would expect.**

On September 27, seven women from three Korean labour rights organizations travelled to Nicaragua for a one-week exchange with members of the Maria Elena Cuadra Women's Movement (MEC). The delegation included members of the Korean Women's Trade Union (KWTU), the Working Women Academy and the Korean Working Women's Association United (KWWA).

With the support of MSN, women from opposite ends of the world shared their experiences and compared strategies and educational tools they use to promote and defend the rights of women workers who are often ignored by traditional trade unions.

The exchange was a follow-up to a conference in Korea one year earlier on the 10th Anniversary of the KWTU. At that conference, MEC's founder and director Sandra Ramos described MEC's 15-year history of organizing and advocating for the rights of women maquiladora workers. MEC currently has 70,000 members, the majority of who work in the maquilas. Its membership also includes domestic workers and women in the informal sector.

**“I've learned so much from the rich history of women workers in Korea, about their role in the struggle of garment workers over the past 30 years, and their fight to gain a place in the union movement. I was particularly interested in the work of the Korean Women's Academy, because we have been working to establish a similar academy in Nicaragua.” – Sandra Ramos, MEC**



**ABOVE:** Celebrating solidarity between women workers worldwide



**ABOVE:** Maria Rhie  
**LEFT:** Women from Korea and Nicaragua share their vision and experiences

**“Women worker activists in Korea were very interested in knowing more about how MEC organizes and trains women. We were interested in how the system of “promotoras” functions, where women workers are trained to train others. We wanted to learn more about the social activism of the Nicaraguan women’s movement, and how they use tools like radio.”**

**– Maria Rhie Chol-soon, Working Women Academy**

**“Before these exchanges, our image of Koreans was as maquila owners or supervisors; it is so important for us in Nicaragua to hear the stories of Korean women workers.”**

**– Sandra Ramos**

**“Twelve years ago when I was in Nicaragua, Korean companies didn’t have a major presence in the country. Now they are the second largest investors. MEC asked a Korean company to allow our delegation to visit their factory, but the company declined.” – Maria Rhie Chol-soon**

**“Women continue to bear the brunt of the economic crisis, facing increasingly precarious conditions in part-time, temporary or outsourced jobs, while always under the threat of losing their jobs to factory relocations if they make any attempt to organize.” – Sandra Ramos**

# Ban on sandblasting: A step in the right direction, but is it enough?



**LEFT:** Turkish poster questions whether fashion jeans are worth dying for

**ON SEPTEMBER 8, JEAN MANUFACTURER Levi Strauss and clothing retailer H&M announced plans to implement a global ban on sandblasting in all of their future product lines. In a joint statement, they encouraged other companies to “join this ban in a move toward eliminating sandblasting as an industry practice.”**

Sandblasting is a finishing process carried out in denim laundries in which jeans and other denim products are blasted with sand particles in order to give them a worn, vintage look desired by Western consumers. Exposure to sandblasting can lead to silicosis, a serious occupational lung disease characterized by inflammation and scarring of the lungs.

Sandblasting has been blamed for 42 deaths in Turkey in the two years ending in July 2007. Thousands more workers in Turkey and around the world are being



put at risk for the mere satisfaction of Western fashion trends.

A 2008 study conducted by the Department of Medicine at Ataturk University found that over half of the 145 former denim sandblasters studied showed evidence of silicosis, while 80% had symptoms of respiratory problems. There are an estimated 8,000-10,000 denim workers in Turkey.

In response to the worker deaths, in 2008 a group of former workers joined together with health professionals and NGOs to form the Solidarity Committee of Sandblasting Labourers (SCSL). Since then, the SCSL has lobbied extensively for a ban on sandblasting, and for compensation for injured workers. Their efforts led to the Turkish government banning sandblasting in March 2009.

However, according to SCSL, the practice has simply moved underground to small, illegal sweatshops throughout the

country. And, it is precisely at these small clandestine operations where the risk of silicosis is highest, because of long working hours, appalling work conditions and the lack of basic respiratory equipment.

The SCSL complains that sandblasting continues to be employed in Turkey’s garment industry, yet “the state still cannot find something that you can find with three to five volunteers.” As US health and safety expert Garret Brown points out, “[t]he Turkish government, like virtually all governments in the developing world, has few inspectors to actually enforce the Ministry of Health ban, and has no political will to restrict a multibillion dollar export business generating essential foreign income.”

Meanwhile, most workers already suffering silicosis from sandblasting are uninsured and receive not benefits under Turkey’s social security program. SCSL has helped launch several court cases seeking compensation for those workers, and a recent lower-court decision awarded a worker a disability pension despite the fact that the worker developed silicosis while working in the informal sector without an employment contract. However, the government is likely to appeal the decision to a higher court.

The announcement by Levis and H&M of a ban on sandblasting in their denim supply chains is a step in the right direction, but as the situation in Turkey demonstrates, brands that have profited from this dangerous practice should also contribute to compensating workers who are already ill. They should also help implement a responsible transition from sandblasting to safe finishing processes so that suppliers do not simply move the work underground, fire their workers or adopt other finishing processes that are injurious to workers’ health. ■



#### CAMBODIA'S APPAREL INDUSTRY

- 470 apparel factories
- 297,000 workers employed in the garment industry and another 48,000 in footwear
- Cambodia's garment exports were worth US\$2.27 billion in the first nine months of 2010, 58% of which went to the USA.
- Apparel and footwear counts for 80% of country's exports
- Minimum wage: US\$61/month
- Living wage: US\$93/month

ABOVE: Cambodian workers are no longer willing to accept a minimum wage that remains insufficient to meet their basic needs.

## 200,000 Cambodian workers walk out

● **continued from page 1**  
 minimum wage for garment workers of US\$61/month. The wage increase – amounting to US\$5/month – was accepted by government-allied trade unions, but not by C.CAWDU and NIFTUC, who collectively represent approximately 75,000 of the country's 297,000 apparel workers. They demanded a US\$93 minimum wage, based on a 2009 study of the amount needed to meet workers' basic needs.

Repeated attempts to initiate sector-wide wage negotiations with GMAC were unsuccessful. However, after the fifth day of the strike, GMAC and the government agreed to establish a new negotiating committee to try to resolve the dispute, and the strikers returned to work. Unfortunately, the unions report that employers are drag-

ging their feet, and serious negotiations have yet to begin.

#### Repercussions for unionized workers

Meanwhile, union leaders and members who participated in the general strike have faced severe consequences. Seventeen factories suspended hundreds of workers who walked out, and thirteen filed legal claims against the strikers and union leaders.

"The right to strike and collective bargaining is well established in Cambodian law, as well as in international human rights law," says Ath Thorn, President of C.CAWDU. "We call upon the government, employers and international brands to respect these rights and pay Cambodian workers a living wage."

The response from international buyers and the Cambodian government has

been mixed. Under pressure from the Cambodian government and some international brands, including Inditex, H&M and Gap, four factories have withdrawn their legal claims. However numerous cases remain before the courts, and some suppliers, including those manufacturing for the three brands, remain unwilling to allow strikers to return to work.

"Threatening unions will do nothing to resolve the underlying issues," says American Center for International Labor Solidarity Country Director David Welsh. "The workers' demand for higher wages is about meeting minimum living standards. They're not demanding Lexuses and luxury villas."

As a result of its nine-year "Better Factories Cambodia program, the Southeast Asian country has long been seen

as a destination for socially-responsible sourcing. Factories are audited regularly by the International Labour Organization- (ILO-) sponsored initiative, and management training and other programs are offered to assist factories in meeting international labour standards.

Although the program has had a positive impact, the country's apparel industry is still plagued with short-term contracting and other forms of precarious work, violations of workers' rights to freedom of association, and poverty wages.

The recent strike may be a wake-up call for companies and governments that Cambodian workers are no longer satisfied with a corporate social responsibility program that does not include a living wage. ■