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## Sri Lanka: Trade unions hard at work

Export processing zones, domestic workers, sailors, migrants... Despite the hostility of many employers, Sri Lanka's trade unions are managing to help the categories of workers who are most difficult to organise. In the north of the country, the war between the Sri Lankan army and the Tamil Tigers makes working conditions dangerous. The government also uses the war as a pretext for attacking press freedom: at least 12 journalists have been assassinated during the past 36 months and dozens more have fled abroad. Read our report and witness accounts.

# Trade unions break into export processing zones

Despite employers' customary hostility, several trade unions have altered their working methods in order to organise workers inside export processing zones. However, Sri Lanka must improve its observance of freedom of association if it wants to retain the trade privileges granted by the European Union and the United States.



→S.G.

**S**ri Lanka has ratified the principal conventions of the ILO guaranteeing freedom of association, and all its labour legislation applies both inside and outside export processing zones (EPZs). In other words, the theoretical foundations for observance of trade union rights in such zones do exist. Unfortunately, in practice, employers and the authorities have erected numerous obstacles that hamper the exercise of freedom of association.

One of the main obstacles is very tangible – the boundary walls surrounding the EPZs: it is forbidden to enter these without authorisation, and this prohibition applies equally to trade unionists and labour inspectors. A trade union leader cannot enter a zone unless his trade union is recognised within an enterprise in that zone, and his one-day pass permits him to visit only that one enterprise. It is therefore impossible for trade unions to make initial contact with workers within the zones. Trade union recruiters must try to meet them at the exit to the zones, on their way home or at the lodgings where most EPZ workers live.

The three trade unions most active within EPZs are the NWC (National Workers Congress), affiliated to the ITUC; the FTZ&GSEU (Free Trade Zones & General Services Employees Union), affiliated to the ITGLWF (International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation); and the Progress Union. In order to maintain contact after the initial meeting, all three have set up, or collaborate with, small centres located not far from EPZs, in the neighbourhoods where workers live. These centres, which are supported by several donor organisations such as the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS), provide a whole range of services including advice on labour-related matters, small-scale vocational training courses, artistic activities and the opportunity to watch television and read magazines. Some of these services are not typical trade union activities, but they are very useful in attracting workers in EPZs, the large majority of whom are women aged 18 to 25. Gradually, as trust builds up between workers and the employees at these centres, the latter suggest the possibility of organising themselves into trade unions.



### Not frightening workers with the word “trade union”!

The trade union movement does not enjoy a very positive image among the Sri Lankan population, partly because of its divisions and the political affiliations of several trade unions. Within EPZs, the mistrust of trade unions is further reinforced by employers who try to convince workers that the establishment of trade unions inevitably leads to job losses. The NWC, the FTZ&GSEU and the Progress Union, all three of which are independent from political parties, have avoided using the word “trade union” in the names of their centres in order not to frighten workers. For instance, the three centres managed by the NWC have been named “Friendship Houses”, the centre managed by the Progress Union is called the “Progress Center”, and the FTZ&GSEU works with “Women Centres” located near the country’s three largest zones.

Nevertheless, it can take many months between the workers’ initial contact with these centres and the attempt to establish a trade union at their factory. Lalitha Dedduwa, coordinator of the three Friendship Houses managed by the NWC, explains: *“We first find out about the enterprise’s state of economic health so as not to demand recognition of a trade union by a factory that is about to close down, because that would provide ammunition to employers who accuse us of hastening bankruptcy. We therefore encourage*

*workers to spread ideas about defending their rights and eventually establishing a trade union. The first activists in an enterprise are very important; we train them to build up their confidence and to enable them to respond to any negative reactions from their fellow workers. We train them in their rights but also in their duties and responsibilities, because they must set an example; it is important for the enterprise to function properly if we want to have a trade union in the long term.”*

The next stage - recognition of the trade union by the employer - is the most problematic. As in many other EPZs around the world, Sri Lankan employers generally try to get rid of their workers once they are identified as trade union activists. Techniques range from soft methods (the offer of promotion) to tough measures (threats of dismissal, threats of physical violence, etc.) via a whole range of other methods (contacting workers’ parents to report their daughters’ activities and threaten them with loss of employment, spreading false rumours about the trade union activist, and so on). In some cases, when ‘threatened’ with the creation of a proper trade union, employers establish or revive “workers’ councils” - bodies elected by the workers, but which have no members and are not accountable to them. The people elected to such councils generally have no real



## Export processing zones struggle to find workers

Accounting for 45% of export revenue, the clothing manufacturing industry is one of the driving forces behind the Sri Lankan economy. It employs some 270,000 workers directly and, according to the JAAF (1), indirectly generates around a million more jobs. Wages range from 9,000 to 15,000 rupees (\$92 to \$140) including bonuses and overtime. *“In 2006, the subsistence level was set at 12,540 rupees for people living in EPZ areas, and 10,608 for the rest”*, explains Progress Union president Palitha Atukorale. *“Even employers admitted the fairness of this assessment, which was based on a study by a group of NGOs and trade unions grouped together under a platform called Alarm, but they argued that they could not pay such a wage. However, with the 30% inflation now hitting Sri Lanka, this estimate needs to be revised to at least 18,000-19,000 rupees.”*

Those worst hit by the wage levels are female workers who have left their villages to work in Sri Lanka’s two largest EPZs, Katunayake and Biyagama. These zones are located on the outskirts of Colombo, over an hour’s drive from the centre of the capital, in areas where there is not much accommodation available. Most workers rent small rooms in local houses. This is good news for local residents, many of whom build new rooms behind their houses to boost their income. Accommodation for workers has become their main source of income.

To limit their expenditure, groups of two to four workers often share small rooms rented near the zones. Living conditions there are very poor: many of these rooms are built of corrugated iron or other materials that make the air very hot in a tropical country like Sri Lanka. Progress Center coordinator Trixie Hettiarachichi explains: *“Since there is generally only one bed in the room, they take turns sleeping in the bed and on the floor. There is usually only one toilet for the whole lodging house, which can accommodate several dozen people. To wash, they have to go to the well or a tank located in the yard or in a public place, where they are exposed to prying eyes and the risk of snake bites. Depending on how ‘comfortable’ the room is, they pay between 2,500 and 4,000 rupees each.”*

There are thousands of unfilled jobs in these zones. *“After five years, a worker receives a bonus equivalent to half a month’s salary for each year’s service”*, FTZ&GSEU secretary-general Anton Marcus explains. *“She may also receive money deposited in a social insurance fund for her pension. This is usually enough to pay for her dowry, and that is when many women stop working. In the past, when an employee returned to her village, she would advise friends or relatives to go to work in the EPZs. That doesn’t really happen now; they can’t disguise the reality of the living and working conditions, which hardly encourage others to leave everything and move there.”*

(1) Joint Apparel Association Forum



negotiating power and are not trained to represent workers effectively. Workers' councils are therefore not very useful but enable some employers to save face when accused of not engaging in social dialogue.

### Months or years before recognition referendum

Under Sri Lankan law, official recognition must be granted to any trade union representing over 40% of employees at a workplace (1). If an employer refuses to do so, the trade union can ask the Ministry of Labour to organise a referendum among the staff to determine whether the 40% threshold has been achieved. Unfortunately, the Ministry often takes months or years to organise such a referendum, which gives unscrupulous employers plenty of time to get rid of workers identified as trade union activists. *"We have never requested a referendum because we know that the employer will do his utmost to dismiss or bribe our activists before it takes place"*, explains Progress Center coordinator Trixie Hettiarachichi. The NWC also tries to avoid holding referenda wherever possible, even though it was through one such vote that it obtained recognition of its first trade union in an EPZ, at the Polytex plant in Koggala (see box below).

*"A new tactic used by EPZ employers is not to wait for a referendum before recognising a trade union, but to recognise only the branch within their own enterprise, refusing any dialogue with the federation's representatives"*, laments Anton Marcus, secretary-general of the FTZ&GSEU. Indeed, there is no legal provision that requires an employer to engage in dialogue with the federation to which his enterprise's trade union belongs. Isolated and without the support of the federation, such trade unions are less strong.

The Progress Union notes the same tendency on the part of employers, although the NWC does not: *"Of the 30 or so enterprises in EPZs where we have members, around 20 accept a certain level of dialogue, including with the federation"*, comments Gerald Lodwick, deputy secretary-general of the NWC. *"This does not mean that they are willing to go further, to engage in collective bargaining, for instance. Hitherto we have succeeded in establishing a collective*



Gerald Lodwick, deputy secretary-general of the NWC. → M.R.R. Asanka

*agreement only at the Polytex and Star Garment factories in the Koggala zone."*

### The government does not honour its GSP promises

Since 2005, Sri Lanka has benefited from the GSP+ trade agreement (2) This has had a major impact: exports of Sri Lankan garments to the European Union, for example, increased from \$993 million in 2005 to \$1.425 billion in

## Good social climate brings new orders

The Polytex clothing factory in Koggala was the first EPZ enterprise to sign a collective agreement. Jayantha Vyanage, the factory's trade union representative, explains: *"We started organising the workers one by one in 1997. By 2002 we had 450 members out of 1,150 workers. We registered the trade union with the Ministry of Labour, and in October 2002 we informed the factory management that we wanted to recruit more and to hold a referendum. They responded negatively: workers were harassed, some leaders received death threats over the phone, managers contacted workers' parents to tell them that their daughters would lose their jobs, and so on.*

*"In July 2003, the referendum at last took place, and we won 82% of the vote. The management thenceforth adopted a constructive attitude towards us and our cooperation led to the adoption of an initial collective agreement in 2004, which was renewed in 2007. We now have two meetings a month with the management: one to discuss workers' problems, the other to analyse jointly how to improve productivity. Since the referendum we have secured several substantial benefits for workers including three days' paid leave a year over the legal minimum, an office for trade union representatives, the payment of membership fees by automatic deduction from wages and a number of wage increases. The employer is very pleased with our cooperation and has told us that the good social climate and the workers' high productivity have helped him to secure more orders."*



2007. At the end of 2008, the European Union is due to decide whether it will continue to grant Sri Lanka this trade privilege. The ITUC and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) have alerted the European Commission to the fact that the Sri Lankan government has failed to meet the commitments it made in 2005 in order to secure the GSP+, namely, implementation of all the ILO's core conventions (and particularly Convention 87 on freedom of association and Convention 98 on the right to organise and collective bargaining).

The ITUC and the ETUC submitted a document to the Commission outlining 10 points that must be improved if the Sri Lankan government wants to demonstrate its willingness to observe its commitments in future. These points are based on remarks made by the ILO's monitoring bodies about Sri Lanka, and could facilitate trade union activities in EPZs if they are implemented. They include, for instance, setting a maximum four-week deadline for holding a referendum on the recognition of a trade union, lowering the 40% threshold for such recognition and adopting measures to combat anti-trade union discrimination. In the United States, an approach similar to that of the ITUC was adopted by the AFL-CIO union in connection with the American GSP.

**"Some of our products are selling at half the price they made four years ago."**

To date, the Sri Lankan government has scarcely adopted any measures that offer any hope of improved observance of its commitments. Nevertheless, the risk of losing the GSP+

is a major concern in the country. The clothing manufacturers' association JAAF (Joint Apparel Association Forum) is lobbying hard to ensure that this does not happen, emphasising among other things the negative repercussions on employment that it envisages in the event of non-renewal: *"We are already having to deal with inflation close to 30%, a rising rupee exchange-rate and the highest energy costs in the region after Singapore"*, explains Rohan Masakorala, deputy secretary-general of the JAAF. *"If we lose the GSP+, we fear a 15-25% loss in jobs in our sector. Our manufacturing firms' profit margins have fallen considerably in recent years, partly because of price reductions on international markets. Some of our products are selling at half the price they made four years ago."*

Over and beyond all these analyses, one thing is certain: clothing factories in EPZs provide the population with some 100,000 jobs, but living and working conditions are so onerous that between 10,000 and 30,000 job vacancies have not been filled in recent years. And if the Sri Lankan government continues to turn a blind eye to violations of trade union rights in these zones, the level of trade union membership will not rise beyond its present 10%, leaving around 90,000 workers unprotected from exploitation. This is far from the aim of the GSP+, and it should not be that of a government that claims to be democratic.

(1) An excessively high threshold in view of recent ILO jurisprudence, according to which even a 30% requirement is excessive

(2) The Generalised System of Preferences permits manufactured goods and some agricultural products exported by developing countries to access the EU market by completely or partially lifting customs duties. The GSP+ provides special incentives for countries that have ratified the principal international conventions, particularly those relating to social rights.

→M.R.R. Asanka



# Death threats and beatings

Of the three main trade unions active in Sri Lanka's export processing zones (EPZs), the FTZ&GSEU (1) has received the most disturbing threats in recent months. Many have been directed at its secretary-general, Anton Marcus, a tireless activist who has become a bogeyman for countless employers. The FTZ&GSEU's vice-president at a clothing factory has also been severely beaten.

Anton Marcus received death threats last year. They started on 6 February 2007, when three employees of the railway trade union newspaper *Akuna* were abducted in Colombo (2). The abductions prompted a spontaneous demonstration the following day outside Colombo Fort station. On 8 February, the government announced that the three men had been taken into custody and were being questioned on suspicion of collaborating with the Tamil Tigers. The union leaders who took part in the demonstration were then the victims of a campaign that sought to associate them with the terrorist uprising. 'Wanted' posters bearing their names and portraying them as traitors and terrorists appeared in public places. Anton Marcus was one of those targeted (3), and subsequently received death threats. The trade unionists lodged several complaints with the police in the hope of receiving protection, but the police failed to investigate the matter seriously.

## White van threat

Anton Marcus had another narrow escape in November 2007: *"Two people claiming to be from the Ministry of Defence came to talk to me at my office. I answered their questions about trade union activities, but I refused to answer personal questions (about my home, etc.), which annoyed them. Around seven in the evening, when I left my office, I noticed a white van parked outside the entrance: that's a very bad sign in Sri Lanka at the moment (4). I took a rickshaw home, saw the white van was following, changed rickshaw and shook them off. The following day, the driver of a car that often takes me to the office was stopped on the road by two men on motorbikes. They asked him when and where he would be taking me next, and promised him money if he'd stop the car where they told him to. They also threatened him. When I learned of this, I realised that the threats were becoming very serious. I wrote to the authorities, to JAAF (5) to notify them, and I also went to the police, but they did nothing about it. Worse still, in July, the President of JAAF told me that I'd end up being abducted in a white van one day."*

Threats to FTZ&GSEU activists can be accompanied by violence, as R. Pieris, vice-president of the FTZ&GSEU branch at the Star Garment clothing factory in the Katunayake zone, knows only too well: *"On 23 June 2008, at around 9 p.m., I was returning home on my moped after work. Suddenly three people on motorbikes came alongside me and ordered me to stop, threatening me with a knife. They told me to give up my trade union activities then beat me with their helmets and kicked me. An acquaintance of mine was nearby; he came up and my attackers fled. I went to the police to lodge*



Anton Marcus, General Secretary of FTZ&GSEU, has received several death and abduction threats since 2007. → M.R.R. Asanka

*a complaint, and then to hospital, where I spent three days being treated for injuries to my eye and stomach. I still have problems with my eyesight and suffer migraines as a result of the blows I received. As I was being attacked, I heard somebody mention the name of one of my assailants. The police took me to the home of this assailant and arrested him. He said he'd been paid by a Star Garment manager to attack me. Two days later he changed his story: first he said it was another Star Garment worker who'd asked him to beat me, then he claimed that I'd hit him and he was just getting his own back, which is untrue."*

(1) Free Trade Zones & General Services Employees Union, affiliated to the ITGLWF.

(2) Nihal Serasinghe, a contributor to the newspaper, Lalith Seneviratne, in charge of layout, and Sisira Priyankara, the newspaper's editor-in-chief.

(3) The others were Sman Ratnapriya and Ravi Kumudesh of the Health Services Trade Union Alliance (HSTUA), Sampath Rajitha and Raja Kannangara of the Joint Railway Trade Union Alliance (JRTUA) and Joseph Stalin of the Ceylon Teachers' Union (CTU).

(4) There have been countless cases of people being abducted by individuals driving white vans in recent months. Some of the victims have never been found, others have been found murdered while others turn up in the hands of the Terrorist Investigation Department, which is known to use torture during interrogations.

(5) Joint Apparel Association Forum.



# Sexual harassment: Tackling the taboo

Thousands of jobs sit vacant in clothing factories in export processing zones (EPZs). Aside from wages and working conditions, the risk of sexual harassment deters many young women from coming to live near these zones.

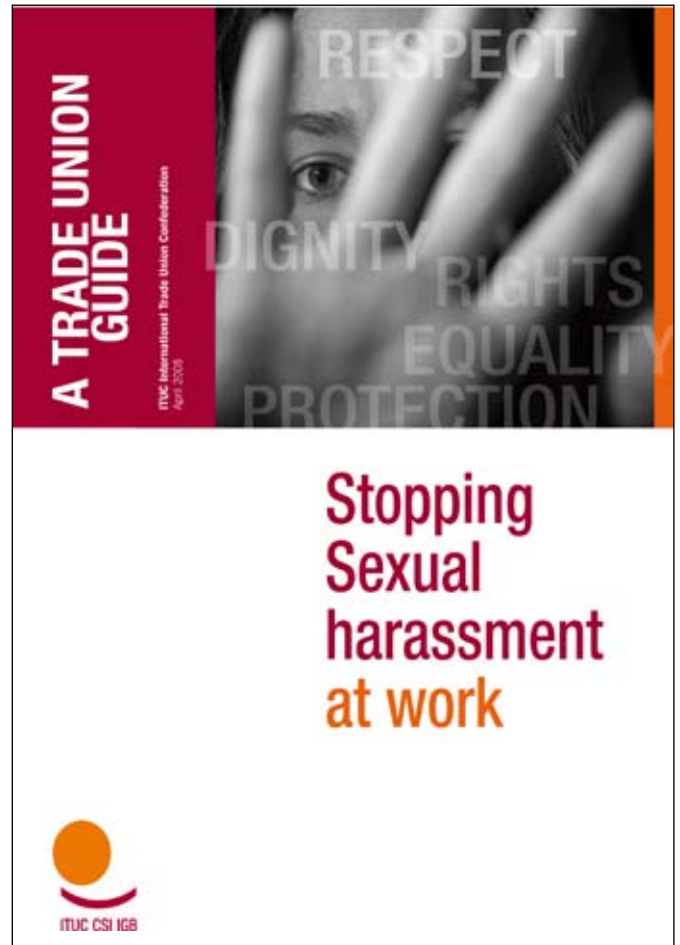
Situated on the outskirts of Colombo, Sri Lanka's two largest EPZs, Katunayake and Biyagama, employ some 70,000 people, the majority of them women aged between 18 and 25, originating from rural areas. However, accommodation around these zones is a major problem (see page 3). Workers generally have to share a basic room in lodging houses – small buildings erected by local inhabitants behind their homes. One of the first risks of sexual harassment occurs when these girls wash at water tanks or wells, which are generally located in the courtyard or in a public place, where they can be caught unawares by voyeurs.

The roads through the areas where these lodging houses are located can also be very dangerous at night. Either poorly illuminated or entirely unlit, they are a favourite haunt of potential molesters. K.P. Kumari, a 26-year-old worker at the Katunayake zone, found this out to her cost last June. *"On 22 June, I was returning to my lodging house after a rehearsal with the cultural group of the FTZ&GSEU trade union, to which I belong. I was followed by two men, one of whom lives in the same lodging house. They spoke to me, threatening to ruin my family life unless I agreed to have intercourse with them, saying that they would show my husband faked photographs. I refused, but on 28 June, while my husband was back in his home village, the man who lives in the same lodging house as me entered my room late at night. He tried to grab my arm, but I was able to escape and take refuge at my sister's place."*

## "The police accused me of attacking my assailants!"

Shocked, and fearing further attacks, K.P. Kumari contacted the police. *"The following day I went to report what had happened to the police in Seeduwa. On 2 July, while I was working at the factory, the police called me on my mobile phone to tell me to come to the station at 4.30. When I arrived, a policeman pushed me against the wall, tried to hit me, then forced me to sit in a corner on the floor. To my astonishment, he wanted me to confess that I'd paid thugs to beat up the two men who'd threatened me! Obviously I refused to acknowledge such a lie, but the police wouldn't let me leave. Every half an hour, a policeman kept demanding that I confess, saying that if I didn't I would be tried in court. The cells at Seeduwa police station were being repaired, and since the police refused to release me I had to spend the night on the floor. I didn't sleep a wink, because I was the only woman there: anything could have happened. The following day, at around 1 p.m., I was brought before a judge. My husband was there, and he stood bail so I could be released on parole pending trial."*

*"After that, I returned to the police station to lodge a complaint against the two men who had harassed me, but it was obvious that the police were reluctant to register the complaint. They asked me to return on various dates to do so."*



*One day, the two men were there at the police station, and I realised that they were friends with the policemen – they all knew each other. That's probably why they believed my two molesters' version of events."* The FTZ&GSEU wrote to the police authorities, demanding that the worker's complaint be taken seriously. It was eventually registered but did not prevent the proceedings against her from going ahead.

K.P. Kumari probably had the courage to report what had happened to her partly because she had been encouraged to defend her rights by a trade union. Because of the vilification of victims of sexual harassment, in Sri Lanka as in many other countries, most cases go undetected. Trixie Hettiarachichi, coordinator of the Progress Center for women workers in the Biyagama EPZ (see page 3): *"When this happens at factories and the perpetrators are in more senior positions, workers are even more reluctant to complain for fear of reprisals. Some years ago, a 24-year-old worker came to ask my advice. Her supervisor was sexually harassing her: she hated it but she didn't dare resist, and she felt very uncomfortable around her fellow workers who realised what was happening. She had lost all self-esteem, felt that she would be similarly harassed wherever she went and eventually turned to prostitution. Through the work that we do and by listening to women, we try to minimise such tragedies, to give women workers dignity and self-confidence. This is essential in areas like Buyagama and Katunayake, where girls are often left to fend for themselves, far from their families."*

# Sailors get organised

Tens of thousands of sailors stop over in the port of Colombo every year, and no fewer than 30,000 Sri Lankans are certified to work as sailors. A new Sri Lankan trade union is working with the ITF (1) to help these workers, who are often isolated at sea.

**S**ri Lanka is an island and as such its economy depends heavily on the sea. Dockworkers at the port of Colombo, who are organised into powerful trade unions, load and unload tens of thousands of containers every month. Trade union representation for sailors is more difficult. *"We began setting up the NUSS (2) two years ago, but there are specific obstacles associated with organising this kind of labour force"*, explains Palitha Atukorale, the union's president. *"In a factory all workers are gathered together in the same place, whereas sailors are scattered, some of them sailing around the world, others at home. This makes it hard to contact them or get them together. Nonetheless, we have managed to recruit 1,300 members out of Sri Lanka's 9,500-10,000 sailors currently at sea (there are 20,000 more seeking work as sailors). This figure is growing all the time."*

One of the NUSS's priorities is to participate actively in the ITF network responsible for inspecting ships sailing under flags of convenience (see box below). The union's secretary-general Ranjan Perera, himself an ex-sailor, trained in London before becoming an ITF inspector. *"I am entitled to board ships flying flags of convenience that have signed the ITF agreement"*, he explains. *"I begin my visit by meeting the sailors, usually in a rest area such as a canteen or cabin. I give them brochures about their rights and HIV. I ask them about their free time, their food and so on. I always try to build up a relationship of friendship and trust with the captain and the other sailors. Most of them are acquainted with this ITF inspection system and know that we are there to protect them and not to cause problems that could lose them their jobs. Next I check the pay slips, safety equipment, canteen, cabins, etc."*

## Ships detained if owners are dishonest

Ranjan Perera inspects an average of 12 ships per week. Most captains do not oppose his coming on board, but if they are reluctant the NUSS threatens to ask the dockers' union to postpone the unloading or loading of the ship concerned (3). *"If I observe irregularities, I notify the port authority, which then conducts its own inspection"*, Ranjan Perera goes on. *"I also contact the ship-owner with a view to taking the first remedial steps. In the meantime the ship can be detained at the port. This loss of time can be very costly to the ship-owner, and this helps to resolve situations."* These independently conducted inspections provide a unique opportunity for sailors to assert their rights. At sea, stranded on ships for weeks on end, it is much harder for them to make their voices heard, even when their wages are not paid or living conditions are very poor. Many foreign sailors have had their wage issues resolved following NUSS intervention.

ITF inspectors' activities are not confined to ships flying flags of convenience. Last August, for instance, a Greek-owned ship flying the Greek flag but whose crew were mainly Indonesian was detained off the port of Colombo for two months because wages were not being paid. *"It was thanks to the ITF network that we were able to discover all the details about the ship and to supply them to the Sri Lankan authorities,"* explains the NUSS president. *"When a ship is detained in this manner, the law stipulates that the Merchant Navy must provide the crew with meals and that this expenditure will be reimbursed by the ship-owner, or by selling the ship at auction if he does not comply. Our trade union made a small contribution to feeding those stranded Indonesian sailors."*

## ITF inspectors regulate flag-of-convenience ships

Flag-of-convenience ships (FOCs) are those flying flags whose nationality is different from the ship-owner's. They are used to circumvent the labour regulations of the actual country of ownership and become a means of paying low salaries and imposing long working hours and dangerous working conditions: since FOCs have no real nationality, they escape the jurisdiction of national seafarers' unions.

Over the past 50 years, the seafarers' unions affiliated to the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) have developed a series of policies to enable the formulation of acceptable minimal standards for sailors on board FOCs. They constitute the basis of a standard ITF collective agreement setting salaries and working conditions for all crew members on FOCs, irrespective of nationality. A blue certificate is awarded by the ITF to all FOCs covered by an agreement that it has approved. This proves that the ITF has ratified the salaries and working conditions that apply on the ship concerned. At present, approximately a quarter of FOCs, employing around 123,000 sailors, are covered by such ITF agreements.

Compliance with these agreements is monitored by a network of over 130 ITF inspectors at ports throughout the world. Their right to inspect FOCs enables them to check whether salaries are being paid and working conditions and social agreements are being observed. If not, they can take the necessary measures to ensure compliance with ITF policy.

(Note: this box is based on information published by the ITF on its website, at the following address: <http://www.itfglobal.org/flags-convenience/index.cfm>)





Ranjan Perera, ITF inspector at the Port of Colombo. → M.R.R. Asanka

The trade union cites numerous irregularities with the hiring of Sri Lankan sailors. Palitha Atukorale: *“Recruitment is usually carried out by agencies registered in Sri Lanka. When they find a sailor a job, a contract must be signed and must in theory be rubber-stamped by the Merchant Navy authorities. This is not always done: unscrupulous agents merely send the men to the ships, after which they are left to their own resources. Such agents will also demand a large sum*

*of money from the sailor in exchange for the job. This can be as much as \$5,000, as was the case with J. Alexander, the Sri Lankan sailor who died not far off the Algerian coast (see box). This system is illegal, but there are many more Sri Lankan sailors than jobs.”*

(1) International Transport Workers’ Federation.

(2) National Union of Seafarers Sri Lanka

(3) Like the NUSS, the dockers’ union within the JSS (Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya) federation is affiliated to the NTUF, one of the ITUC’s three affiliates in Sri Lanka.

## Trade union solidarity gathers \$105,000 following the death of a sailor

In September 2007, the family of a Sri Lankan sailor who died not far from Algeria received \$105,000 following an intervention by the ITF inspectors’ network and one of its affiliates, the National Union of Seafarers Sri Lanka (NUSS). This compensation is a very large sum by Sri Lankan standards and attracted the interest of the national media, prompting over 100 new members to join the NUSS. NUSS President Palitha Atukorale explains how the union was able to achieve such a result:

*“This sailor, J. Alexander, worked on a Greek ship. On 20 August 2007, as the ship was approaching Algerian territorial waters, a work accident occurred on board. In the absence of witnesses, we have only the captain’s account: he said that J. Alexander was spray painting, the gas ignited and he died from his burns. The Sri Lankan agent who recruited J. Alexander did not notify his family. However, a friend of his, who was in Italy, learned of the incident from a newspaper. He then contacted J. Alexander’s wife to ask when the funeral would be held. She was very surprised and called the recruiting agent, who told her that her husband had been hurt, but that he was expected to recover within two days. He also promised to call her to give her news. Two days later, the agent did not telephone the wife, but he did call me to tell me that J. Alexander was dead. It was our trade union that informed his wife.*

*His wife came to Colombo with the rest of her family in the hope of meeting the agent and finding out more information, but he refused to receive her at his office. She came to see us in tears and pleaded with us to help her. I called the agent, who told me that he would contact me once he had further news. Shocked by this inhuman response, our trade union convened a meeting of 10 men, hired a minibus and all went to the agent’s office. He was cornered by our men against the wall and immediately gave assurances that he would deal with the case properly. J. Alexander had had to pay him \$5,000 illegally to get this job, even though his salary was only \$1,000. Under pressure from us, the agent agreed to repay the \$5,000 to the wife right away (J. Alexander had worked for only two or three months before his fatal accident). The ITF also intervened, and its efforts made it possible to secure \$105,000 from the ship-owner for the dead sailor’s family.”*

# How to migrate without being exploited?

Each year, over 200,000 Sri Lankans set off to work abroad, hoping to find a decent job to help their families. All too often, however, they encounter exploitation and humiliation. Thirty-one migrant associations organised by the trade union NWC are working to prevent such bad experiences.

*"I went to Jordan as a domestic worker in 2001 for two-and-a-half years", recounts M.A. Malhiga, a 29-year-old woman from the plantation region of Hatton. "I was promised a salary of 10,000 rupees (\$92) but received only 7,500. When I returned to Sri Lanka, I realised that my husband had betrayed my trust and spent all the money. Disgusted by his attitude, I collected my jewellery and found another job as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia. Under my contract, I was supposed to earn 550 riyals (\$146) a month, but I only received 400. On top of that, my employer stole my jewellery, which was worth 60,000 rupees (\$557). I couldn't go to the police because my employer wouldn't let me out of the house. I did protest, but he claimed he hadn't stolen anything and said I must have lost the jewellery. Eventually I had to pay for my return ticket, despite the fact that my employer was supposed to buy it."*

Thousands of Sri Lankan women migrant workers have had similar experiences, and sometimes even worse - sexual harassment, for instance. Fortunately, in many other cases employers behave properly, wages are paid on time and the money they earn enables the women to start their own money-making activity after returning home. In a bid to improve the chances of successful migration, the NWC union has developed a programme to support and help migrant workers. This programme begins prior to departure with training organised by a network of 31 migrant workers' associations.

*"Unlike government training, which focuses on the development of migrants' professional skills, our training focuses on their rights, the working conditions that they can expect and demand, the culture of host countries, HIV prevention and so on", explains P. Samaranyake, one of the programme's coordinators. "Around 2,000 migrants attended our training courses in 2007."*

Migrant worker organisations also try to prevent human trafficking by informing those about to leave of the risks of encountering unscrupulous agents: *"72% of migrants travel via recruiting agents, sometimes assisted by local recruiters. There are many irregularities in these recruitment processes",*

*laments P. Samaranyake. "Often the agent deals with the administrative procedure involved in obtaining passports, but charges much more than the normal price for this – up to 5,000 rupees (\$46), whereas the actual price is 1,500 rupees. There are also risks of sexual harassment between a migrant leaving her village and reaching the airport, because she is often taken in charge by recruiters during that time, not all of whom are trustworthy. The less scrupulous agents give them their passports only at the very last moment at the airport, in order to keep control over them, which can sometimes result in abuse."*

## International trade union agreements

The NWC seeks to conclude agreements with trade unions and NGOs in host countries in order to help Sri Lankan migrants in difficulties. Gerald Lodwick, deputy secretary-general of the NWC: *"We have such agreements with ITUC affiliates in Jordan, Mauritius and Cyprus, and we hope to sign another one soon with Kuwait, with the help of the ACILS."* (1) These contacts are useful, for instance, when migrant workers send no news after their departure, often because they are prevented from doing so by their employer. This silence obviously causes great anxiety amongst their relatives. The latter are generally poor people, with no experience of international relations and speaking only Sinhalese or Tamil, so it is very difficult for them to take the necessary steps themselves to trace the migrant worker. The NWC tries to help such families track down their relatives.

*"I knew a case of a woman who had set off for Kuwait seven months earlier but whose husband, a plantation worker, had received no letters, money or news", recounts U.R. Mineke, another coordinator of the NWC's migrant worker programme. "We contacted the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, the authority in charge of regulating and protecting Sri Lankan workers abroad. They called the placement agency in Kuwait and the recruitment agency in Colombo. After some exchanges, the employer was found, and he agreed to send the money to her husband and promised to allow her to phone her family once a week. The most difficult*

## "My boss banged my head against the wall"

*"I worked in Kuwait for five years, then in Saudi Arabia, as a domestic worker. My last job lasted nine months, during which my life was hell, mainly because I wasn't paid by the couple I was living with. All alone in a far-away country, I didn't know who to turn to for help. I eventually went to the Sri Lankan Embassy, telling them that I wanted to return home, but they contacted my employer who told them he'd paid me by bank transfer. The embassy asked for receipts, he said he'd given them to me... and the people at the embassy believed him! They advised me to carry on working a little longer with this employer. When I went back, my boss was angry that I'd gone to the embassy and asked to return to Sri Lanka. She grabbed me by the hair and banged my head against the wall, so much so that I still have problems with my eyesight. I spent two days in tears before those employers agreed to release me, although they didn't return my passport. I took refuge at the embassy, which provided me with an emergency passport, and I was able to return home at last."* A. Badurmiza, 43, former domestic worker



cases are those where the migrant is transferred to another country after reaching what was supposed to be their country of destination. We've known several such cases, for instance between the United Arab Emirates and Oman. It is very difficult to track down a migrant who has been taken, often illegally, to a country other than their intended destination. Sometimes, they don't even realise that they aren't in the country stated on their contract."

**At least \$2.7 billion of remittances**

Money remitted by migrant workers to their families in 2006 accounted for 8.7% of Sri Lanka's GDP. In 2007, remittances totalling \$2.7 billion were recorded, and the amount would certainly be greater if it included payments made via informal channels (2). However, these impressive figures should not make us lose sight of the fact that, even after years of hard labour, some migrants find themselves with

nothing once they return home, either because their wages have not been paid, or because their families have already spent them all. "We are therefore developing activities to support migrants returning to Sri Lanka", explains Gerald Lodwick. "Since they generally have no more qualifications than they did before leaving, we can offer them courses at our vocational training centres, which are also open to members of their families, and then help them to generate their own employment by means of small loans."

The NWC is also campaigning for migrant workers to retain voting rights in Sri Lanka. Other trade unions support this demand, including the NTUF, another ITUC affiliate in Sri Lanka. The trade union movement hopes that the possibility of securing migrant workers' votes will encourage Sri Lankan politicians to campaign more for their rights.

(1) American Center for International Labor Solidarity  
(2) Source of figures: World Bank, Migration and Remittances Factbook

## We take care to help the children of migrants in order to prevent trafficking

We do our best to ensure that the children of parents who are migrants don't drop out of school: sometimes, when a child's mother is abroad, the children lose interest in their education. We organize activities with these children so that they won't feel alone, and we explain to them why their mothers had to leave. This is also a way to prevent the trafficking of the children, who would otherwise be at a higher risk of being recruited – for instance, as domestic workers in the cities if they drop out of school. (Chandra Kasturirathi, NWC's migrant worker programme in Kurunagala)

ITUC affiliates in Sri Lanka mobilised to mark World Day for Decent Work. On this photo, K. Velayudam, president of the National Trade Union Federation (NTUF), hands out some of the 25,000 leaflets on decent work distributed on the occasion.



# Campaign of terror against the free press

At least 12 media professionals have been killed over the last 36 months, without any investigation bringing those responsible to justice. The finger of blame is pointed at the government.

**F**reedom of the press is one of the pillars of democracy. The Sri Lankan government has a very particular reading of this principle: it feels that while the country is at war (against the Tamil Tigers), journalists have to choose which side they are on. Those who decide to exercise their role freely, trying to verify and, in some instances, contradict the information provided by the army or the government, are considered as traitors, as sympathisers of the terrorist movement. They are issued with death threats, attacked, abducted or killed by “unknown assailants” – usually paramilitaries or thugs hired by the authorities to do their “dirty work”.

The latest attempt on the life of a media professional took place on 8 September. Radhika Devakumar, a reporter working in Batticaloa for the Tamil language daily, the *Tinakaran*, was attacked at around 7:30 p.m. by assailants who burst into his home and shot him three times. He received serious wounds to the shoulder, abdomen and chest, but managed to survive thanks to his relatives who quickly took him to the hospital. Paranirupasingam Devakumar, who worked in Jaffna as a correspondent for the Maharaja Television group, was not so “fortunate”. He was killed on the evening of 28 May in Navanthurai, a few kilometres away from Jaffna, as he and a friend made their way home by motorbike. He was hacked to death with a sharp object by unknown assailants. His friend, Mahendran Varadan, a 24-year-old computer technician, later died from his wounds in hospital. Paranirupasingam Devakumar is the last journalist to have been killed, to date.

## One of the most dangerous places in the world for the press

In its annual report, the global organisation defending freedom of the press, Reporters without Borders, unequivocally condemned the stifling of press freedom in Sri Lanka, especially in the north of the country: “The northern Jaffna Peninsula, where Tamils are in the majority and which the army directly administers, has become a nightmare for journalists, human rights activists and civilians in general. A wave of murders, kidnappings, threats and censorship has made it one of the most dangerous places in the world for the press.”

*“Jaffna used to have a very strong media culture, with 200 journalists working on the ground, but not a single journalist dares to work on the ground there now, even when there are abductions or murders,”* explains Sunanda Deshapriya, spokesperson for the Free Media Movement (1). *“All those who have done so have either been killed or threatened. More than 25 journalists from Jaffna have fled Sri Lanka because of this. The editor of Uthayan, the most widely-sold daily in Jaffna, has been living in the newspaper’s offices for over two and a half years because of the threats, and only five journalists still dare to go there. As a result, the people of Jaffna no longer have a voice, and the government does not allow foreign journalists to go there freely.”*

## Journalists live in fear

The Tamil journalists who want to work freely are caught in the middle of the battle field: with the Sri Lankan govern-



ment on one side and, on the other, the Tamil Tigers, who still control part of the island and are equally intolerant of any form of criticism or dissent. But they are not the only ones living in fear: journalists across the country, regardless of what language they speak, are threatened if they question the government’s account of events. Namal Perera, a journalist and head of the free press campaign at the Sri Lanka Press Institute (SLPI), was the target of one of the latest attacks in the capital. On 30 June, six people in a white van (2) tried to kidnap him from the vehicle he was driving in with an employee of the British Embassy in Sri Lanka. They broke the windows of the car to try to grab him, but were forced to flee following the protests of passers-by. In an unprecedented move, the Publishers’ and Editors’ Guild of Sri Lanka offered a reward of over 45,000 dollars for any information leading to the arrest of those responsible for the attempted kidnapping. Namal Perera, like dozens of other Sri Lankan journalists, was forced to take refuge abroad, to avoid any further attacks.

In some instances, the threats against independent journalists come from the highest levels of the government. In a statement made this year, the President’s younger brother, the Secretary of State for Defence, Gotabhaya Rajapakse, said, “Journalists should not be allowed to write about military matters and strong action should be taken against those who do”. Already in 2007, the same Defence Secretary had phoned the editor-in-chief of the *Daily Mirror* newspaper and threatened to have her sacked and to wipe out one of her colleagues if they did not stop publishing articles on the plight of civilians caught up in the war.

Threats, assaults and murders have driven most of Sri Lanka’s media to self-censorship, even when dealing with subjects that have no relation to the war or terrorism. In December 2007, Labour Minister Mervyn Silva and his henchmen stormed into the offices of a state TV station, Rupavahini, in Colombo. Several employees witnessed the scene as he ordered his guards to give the news director a beating for failing to broadcast one of his speeches. The employees at the TV station who took part in a campaign to demand punitive measures against the minister were threatened and assaulted. The Labour Minister has since committed other attacks on journalists, without so much as a reprimand...

(1) <http://www.freemediasrilanka.org/English/> Affiliated to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)

(2) “White van” has become a term to be feared in present day Sri Lanka: many people have been abducted by individuals in white vans, often without licence plates. Some of those abducted have never been seen again, some have been found dead, and others have reappeared in the custody of the Terrorist Investigation Department, which is known for its use of torture during interrogations.





I work every day from 8am to 6pm, except Sundays, for 150 rupees a day (1.30 dollars). We have no right to medical cover or paid leave. One of the main problems is the constant increase in the workload, especially for those who live in with their employer: a domestic worker is hired to do such and such a task, but the employer often tells her to do more and more, without her assent and without raising her wage. This is often the case when the employer has guests, for example.



(Nadeeka Bandara, president of the domestic workers' association in Kandy)

## Campaign for decent domestic work

With no legislation to protect them, the 125,000 domestic workers in Sri Lanka are among the most exploited in the country. The National Workers' Congress (NWC), affiliated to the ITUC, has decided to organise and fight alongside them.

The Sri Lankan media often carries reports about the terrible exploitation endured by migrant domestic workers, in the Gulf countries, for example. Interestingly, much less attention is given to the plight of the domestic workers who stay in Sri Lanka. Yet the abuses they face are much the same: non-payment of the wages agreed to, countless overtime hours, indecent living conditions, humiliation, etc. Several of the factors underlying these abuses are also the same, such as the absence of labour legislation protecting domestic labour, their poor image in society or the indifference of the authorities and the police.

Outraged by this injustice, the NWC launched several programmes in 2007 to assist domestic workers, with the support of the Dutch union, the CNV (1). It has set up a help line for anyone wanting to seek assistance or to report the abuse of a domestic worker. The help line number has been widely publicized, including in the regions that most domestic workers come from, where 10,000 leaflets have been distributed. Grace Silva, who is fluent in the three most widely spoken languages in Sri Lanka (Sinhalese, Tamil and English), is in charge of taking the calls: "I receive three or four calls a day. Most of them are about the non-payment of salaries for which a verbal agreement was made. I then call the employer, and this outside intervention is usually sufficient to resolve the problem without the domestic worker losing her job. I also receive calls to report the use of child domestic labour, as well as a few calls from domestics who are looking for work (and mistake us for a recruitment agency). In some instances, domestic workers call us for help with personal problems (family problems, poverty, ...), so I try to put them in touch with a social service.

### Proposed ILO Convention encourages the NWC

To mark the World Day for Decent Work, the NWC launched a media campaign to raise public awareness about the exploitation suffered by domestic workers and to promote the signing of a petition for the passing of legislation to protect them. "Since there is no legislation governing this sector and no minimum wage, domestic workers depend on the goodwill of their employer," says Gerald Lodwick, Assistant General Secretary of the NWC. "Wages vary between 3,000 and 8,000 rupees a month (27 to 74 dollars) for live-in domestic workers. Those living out earn between 150 and 300 rupees a day (1.30 to 2.70 dollars). Some employers respect their domestics, but others take full advantage of their vulnerability, paying as little as 1,500 rupees a month to the most defenceless women, such as those from displaced persons camps. The passing of specific legislation on domestic workers is pivotal to the fight against exploitation. In this respect, we are encouraged by the decision of the ILO Governing Body to include decent domestic work on the agenda of the International Labour Conference of 2010, with a view to drawing up an ILO Convention specific to domestic workers."



→ M.R.R. Asanka

The NWC has also set up domestic workers' associations across the country. There are 14 such associations at present and they meet every two months. The content of the meetings varies according to the members' skills and the problems they face at the time: part of the meeting is devoted to passing on information about the NWC's activities at national level and another part is focused on discussing how to deal with a problem posed by a given employer, etc. On occasions, brief training activities are also held within the meeting, such as sewing workshops. Suneetha, president of the domestic workers association in Matugama: "We approach other domestic workers at the markets or elsewhere in the streets to talk to them about our association and the injustices we have to fight together, etc. I was not aware that I had any rights prior to taking part in the activities of the NWC. It is very important that trade unions come to the aid of domestic workers: without their support we are all alone in front of our employer, and it's impossible to negotiate."

Through these associations, the union also helps domestic workers to build a better image of themselves. A study carried out by the NWC in 2007 revealed that most domestic workers consider ill treatment, such as verbal abuse and false accusations, to be part of their lives and not as an injustice that needs to be fought against. When asked what action they would take if mistreated, only 8% of the domestic workers responded that they would go to the police for help; 47% replied that they would leave their job; 20% said they would talk to their parents, and 25% said they would not know what to do. "When a live-in domestic worker is beaten by her employer, it's very difficult for her to defend herself: if she asks the police for help, they always take the side of the employer, unless she has very visible marks on her body. It's even more difficult to defend oneself in the case of sexual harassment, as it's taboo," explains Grace Silva.

(1) Christelijk Nationaal Vakverbond, affiliated to the ITUC

# Teaching under bombardment

Sri Lanka has for decades been torn apart by the conflict between the Sri Lankan army and the Tamil Tigers. The fighting has intensified over recent months. Members of a Tamil teaching union give personal accounts of life and work in the most dangerous areas of the country (1).

It is impossible to summarise the civil war in Sri Lanka in just a few lines. In short, it is a conflict between the central government and a Tamil separatist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Internationally recognised as a terrorist group, the LTTE is demanding self-determination and the creation of a Tamil state in the northeast of the island (Tamils form 18% of the Sri Lankan population and the Sinhalese 74%). The Tamil Tigers long controlled large areas in the north and east of the country, where they established their own parallel administration to that of the central government. Owing to internal divisions and military routs, however, the parallel administration is currently confined to the north of Sri Lanka. In recent weeks, major offensives by the Sri Lankan army have further reduced the area controlled by the LTTE, but barriers to the exercise of free journalism in the conflict zones make it difficult to draw an exact picture of the military situation (see article on the repression of the free press, page 12).

For the Tamil civilian population, over and above any political considerations, one thing is clear: fear is part of their everyday lives. In the government-controlled Tamil areas, not a day goes by without civilians being arrested, tortured and beaten, etc., for suspected links with the Tamil Tigers. The plight of civilians in the areas controlled by the Tamil Tigers is no less desperate. In addition to the bombardments of the Sri Lankan army, Tamil families have to cope with a terrorist movement that tolerates no dissent and has long forced Tamil children to join it as soldiers (although it would seem that the LTTE's use of child soldiers has diminished over recent years).

## "The artillery fire startles the pupils"

This climate of terror has a huge psychological impact on the children. In Vavuniya, for example, a town in the government-controlled area, the Sri Lankan army fires shells practically every day at the area controlled by the LTTE, just ten kilometres north of the town. Most Tamils from Vavuniya have family or friends in that area and every fire of the cannon sparks fears for their safety. "My school is just next to a military base," says Krishnan, a member of the Ceylon Tamil Teachers' Union (2). "The sound of the artillery fire is very loud in my classroom, it startles the pupils. It's really difficult to give classes under such circumstances."

The teachers also speak of the distress they observe among their pupils following round up operations. These operations are generally led by the Sri Lankan army (100% Sinhalese) and consist in rounding up all the people from a given district in a public square and lecturing them on their duty to denounce LTTE sympathisers. In some instances, they are forced to file one by one in front of an army informer masked by a balaclava. If the informer nods his head as you stand before him, you are arrested under suspicion of being a Tamil Tiger sympathiser. Those arrested are generally tortured and held without trial for an indefinite period.



A family finds itself left with nothing on 13 August 2008 following a fire at the displaced persons camp in Poonthoddam (Vavuniya). →S.G.

## Checkpoints and stress on the way to work

Maaran works as a teacher in the area controlled by the Tamil Tigers. "My school is 40 km from Omantai, where there is a major checkpoint between the government-controlled area and the LTTE-controlled area. I live in the Vavuniya region, eight kilometres south of Omantai, in the government-controlled area. I go to work by motorbike and the journey can take me between one and three hours, depending on the number of checkpoints I have to cross and the intensity of the checks and searches by the Sri Lankan army at the checkpoint. The main parts of my motorbike are systematically dismantled and then reassembled to check whether I'm carrying any of the items or materials that the Sri Lankan government forbids being taken into the LTTE zone (Ed: for fear that they might be used by the Tamil Tiger rebels). The soldiers also check that I'm not carrying more than the five litres of petrol needed for my journey to the school." This is a measure taken by the Sri Lankan army to stop fuel being resold to the Tamil Tigers.

To minimise the risks, Maaran lodges near his school during the week and only returns to Vavuniya on weekends. "The journey to my school in Omantai is dangerous; the Sri Lankan army sometimes carries out ambushes in the area, and has already set off mines as the vehicles of government employees go by, mistaking them for Tamil Tigers. It's very dangerous throughout the LTTE-controlled area, because of the bombings carried out by the Sri Lankan army. It tries to limit civilian casualties, but contrary to what it tries to make people believe, civilians are often hit by its missiles. Schools have already been hit, and a teacher lost his life at the beginning of August after bombs were dropped from military aircraft. We all rush to the shelters during the bombings, and go back to giving classes as normal when they are over. The pupils and teachers are used to living under such stressful conditions, but it's very difficult, nevertheless, to provide children with a good education in such circumstances.



The fact that families are constantly having to flee the combat zones is another serious problem affecting schooling. "When I was appointed to this school there were 500 pupils, but there are only 150 now, as the others have been internally displaced with their families to other parts of the LTTE-controlled area. My school was also displaced recently, when the fighting came too close. At least 55 schools have already been displaced in this area, but the cost of moving is not reimbursed, and we do not receive any kind of danger money despite the ever growing risks. All the government employees working in the LTTE area face the same difficulties.

#### Cautious trade union movement

Out of caution, most Sri Lankan trade unions take care not to get too closely involved in the conflict dividing the country. A few trade unions have, however, occasionally called on the government to abandon the military solution in favour of negotiations, even though this is very difficult with a terrorist movement such as the Tamil Tigers. One of them is NATURE, which groups 19 Sri Lankan unions, including the Ceylon Tamil Teachers' Union. "NATURE appealed to the Sri Lankan president, urging him to end the fighting, but the government responded that there could be no peaceful solution whilst the LTTE continues with its campaign of violence," explains Palitha Atukorale, the president of NATURE. "So

NATURE then wrote to Vellupillai Prabhakaran, the leader of the LTTE, to urge him to seek a peaceful solution, but to no avail, unfortunately.

The unions working near the combat zones have to be much more cautious. "In the past, we did carry out some initiatives in favour of peace, but when the current government came to power and decided to do away with the LTTE by military means, we had to keep quiet, so as not to place ourselves at risk," explains Vishwanathan, a member of the Ceylon Tamil Teachers' Union in Vavuniya. "As unions, our activities are confined to work-related issues: problems concerning promotions, taking leave, the transfer of teachers to villages far away from their homes, etc. Joint action with the rest of the Sri Lankan trade union movement is difficult: the Vavuniya region is cut off from the rest of the country by a major checkpoint in Medawachchiya, and crossing the checkpoint means wasting a lot of time, because of the all the red tape. The circumstances make it difficult for us to attend trade union meetings in the capital, Colombo, for example. We do, however, want to maintain contact with teachers from all around the country, because workers, be they Tamil, Sinhalese or from other communities, have every interest in remaining united, despite the fighting led by the military."

(1) To protect the identity of the teachers who had the courage to talk about the situation despite the risks involved, all of the names of the people quoted have been changed.

(2) Affiliated to Education International.

## 5,000 children back in school thanks to a trade union project

**Sri Lanka has the best primary school attendance rate (97%) in South Asia, but several thousand children continue to drop out of school and fall prey to exploitation. A trade union project is helping them get back into mainstream education, as well as contributing to the recruitment of some of their parents.**

Sri Lanka takes great pride in its massive commitment to ensuring free education for all, from primary to university level, a policy introduced as early as the 1940s. The efforts of successive governments have borne fruit: literacy (92%) and primary school attendance (97%) rates are much higher than in countries with similar economic profiles. Still, the situation is by no means perfect. The school dropout rate among the under-14s from poor communities remains high, teachers are in very short supply in certain areas, and children can still be found in occupations such as domestic work, fishing and street hawking.

The National Workers' Congress (NWC), affiliated to the ITUC, has been active in the fight against child labour since 1996. "We consider it our duty as trade unionists to fight against child labour," explains the Assistant General Secretary of the NWC, Gerald Lodwick. "Firstly, because a child that works occupies the job of an adult and, secondly, because we are well placed to identify cases of child labour thanks to our members' networks that span all levels of society." Assisted by a number of partners (ILO, UNICEF and Solidarité laïque), the NWC has set up nine centres to help children falling behind with their schooling, to prevent them from dropping out, and to help children who have dropped out to catch up on what they have missed, so that they can go back to mainstream education. Over 5,000 children have benefited from the help of these centres since 1996.

The NWC's aim is not to replace state education but to offer

children in difficulty a helping hand to keep them in school and out of work. "We are conscious that many families are not in a position to help their children with things such as homework when they go back to school," explains Gerald Lodwick. "The parents don't have much of an education, and the environment at home isn't always conducive to study, for example, when the whole family lives in a single room. The nine teachers working at our centres are able to help, by offering them the one-to-one guidance that teachers in state schools don't have time for. The classes in state schools are usually overcrowded, and 95% of the pupils have to follow private tuition to pass their exams. The poorer parents cannot afford to pay for private tuition, so our centres come in very handy.

#### Several visits to convince parents

It is not always easy to convince parents to let their children attend NWC centres. Rasika Priyadarshani, a teacher at the centre in Koggala explains: "We have to go and see the parents several times to convince them. Often, during our first visit, they say that their children dropped out of school because of poverty or because they couldn't follow the pace of learning. Some argue that their children feel ashamed to go to school because they do not have good shoes or a school bag like the other children (in this case, the NWC sometimes helps by donating a bag or a pair of shoes, etc.). After the



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**"I attach a lot of importance to the development of a child's self confidence. Less time is dedicated to this in state schools. I organise debates and encourage the children to express themselves in public and, as a result, my pupils have much more confidence in themselves at the state school – when they have to speak in front of everyone, for example.**

Monika Sriyan, a teacher at a NWC centre in Matugama.



*Tsunami, we came across some examples of children who did not want to go to school anymore because they were too afraid. We remind the parents that according to Sri Lankan law children must go to school until at least the age of 14."*

In regions where poverty and social exclusion are rife, such as the plantations, some children are sent to the cities to work as domestics. One such case is Hatton, a hilly district covered in tea plantations, where the NWC has set up a number of networks: a domestic workers' association (see page 13), a migrant workers' association, and a remedial education centre, etc. *"Activities such as these give us greater visibility and credibility, which helps when it comes to convincing the parents to prioritise their children's education,"* explains Chandra Kumar, the NWC coordinator in the region. *"If need be, we can also call on the help of the local government officers in charge of protecting children's rights."*

### Rewarding work

The teachers involved in this project are convinced that they are making a valuable contribution to society. As Anasta Bernie, a teacher at the NWC centre in Beruwela (coastal region) puts it: *"I'm proud to have children from Sri Lanka's three biggest communities (Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim) in my class. Outside our programmes, these children usually go to the schools of each separate community. Our programmes teach them to live together. It's a really satisfying*

*job. I remember the case of a 13-year-old girl, for example, whose father was deceased and whose mother works as a street sweeper. Her house is a long way from the state school. She was not very literate, and her mother was afraid of letting her take the bus to school, in case she read the destination wrong and got lost. I went to see the mother and convinced her to let her daughter take the 30-minute walk to our centre. She is now able to read and write, and takes the bus to the state school."*

The NWC organises a monthly meeting with the parents of the children enrolled in its centres and representatives of the district authorities. The parents talk about the problems they face and, if they are work-related, the NWC uses its expertise as a trade union to come to their aid. The relatives of the children enrolled in the NWC's catch-up classes can also follow vocational training at one of the union's five vocational training centres. Vocational training is also offered to children aged over 14 who have been out of school for a long time and would have difficulty going back into mainstream education.

*"The programmes to fight child labour are also recruitment strategies,"* concludes Gerald Lodwick. *"Around 500 parents have already become members of the NWC thanks to the help we give them following the monthly meetings and the support we provide for their children. Around 150 of our former pupils have also become members on reaching adulthood."*



"There were not many children in my class initially, but after visiting the shanties and meeting with the families, 30 children now come to our centre on a daily basis. There are often serious social problems in the shanty towns (fighting, alcoholism, ...), so a lot of dialogue is needed to convince some parents to send their children to school," explains Iresha Udatangani, a teacher at this NWC remedial education centre in Colombo. →M.R.R. Asanka