

CASUALISATION OF LABOUR

Back from Gurgaon

GWN

Gurgaon, a satellite town in the south of Delhi has become the symbol of 'Shining India'. Many people are dazzled by the glass-fronts of shopping-malls and corporate towers and fail to see the development of a massive industrial working-class behind the facade of the 'post-fordist' display of consumerism. Together with industrial centres like the Pearl River Delta in China or the Maquiladoras in Northern Mexico the Delhi industrial belt has become a focal point of global working class formation.

In the industrial areas of Gurgaon a very particular class composition has emerged.(1) Hundreds of thousands of migrant garment workers work next to the assembly lines of India's biggest automobile hub, and next to hundreds of thousands of young workers sweating under the head-sets of Gurgaon's call centres. Labour organizations are forced to re-think the traditional understanding of what 'workers' are, how they struggle and how this struggle can become a process of self-empowerment towards self-emancipation.

The specific structure of industry and the composition of the work-force first of all pushes all beyond the regional and national framework. On the most obvious level this happens through the global market. In the spring of 2008 the Rupee reached its peak with respect to the US Dollar, causing bad export conditions. The garment industry in Gurgaon dismissed thousands of workers and shifted orders to 'low currency' countries like Vietnam and Bangladesh. In autumn 2008 the Rupee plummeted, but together with it the US and European markets crashed and sent shock-waves through the industrial areas of Gurgaon : credit crunch for the real estate, garment orders came down, US-banking services slumped. At one point in time, workers in one space—who might otherwise have thought that they have little in common but chai stalls—faced a common situation : cut in bonuses or piece-rates, stopping free company meals or transport, threat of job cuts. The potential for a socially explosive tea-party of english-speaking call centre night-shift youth, migrant garment and construction workers and young skilled workers in the car part plants entered the Industrial Model Towns—a mass base of actual 'internal threat'.(2) There is a second level on which the 'collective work-force' has to be grasped beyond the boundaries of factory walls and company units. This level is shaped by the local, regional and global division of labour. Here are some examples. Maruti Suzuki connects their assembly lines and welding-robots via transport chains with production units of hundreds of outsourced suppliers, reaching into the work-shop slum-villages of Faridabad or the green-field industrial areas along the National Highway. Assembly plants around the globe depend on parts manufactured in Gurgaon by companies like Rico or Delphi. IT and BPO offices cooperate closely with overseas branches, while production in the huge garment factories is supplied via supervisor middlemen with piece-work from working (wo)men stitching 'at home'. On a third level the character of the work-force itself cannot be grasped locally: the

majority of workers are migrant workers, going back and forth between urban industrial life and villages. Wages are too low to reproduce a nuclear family in Gurgaon, so most workers leave their family in the villages. Similarly it is nearly impossible to survive a long period of unemployment - or for that matter, a long period of strike - in Gurgaon. Though disintegrating, the village still functions as the main unemployment insurance of these workers. Changes in villages, such as the introduction of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme or the general development of the agricultural market, reverberates through the working conditions in Gurgaon and echoes back into the rural economy. Workers arrive in Gurgaon with hopes, which are in most cases disillusioned. They survive brutal 16-hour shifts by keeping both village misery and glorification in mind. Their urge of 'not having to be a worker anymore' expresses itself individually in plans to open a shop back home. Reality forces them to find a collective and social expression of this urge to abolish their existence 'as workers'.

The main element of this reality 'as worker' has been the casualisation of the workforce. In winter 2000/2001 Maruti Suzuki used a labour dispute of minor importance to lock-out the permanent work-force and to replace them, through compulsory 'Voluntary Retirement Schemes', with temporary workers. This has been repeated in other companies to a point where 70 to 80 per cent of the average factory workforce is nowadays hired through contractors - due to their mobility they have less interest in struggles for long running wage agreements and company pension schemes. They have more immediate desires and anger. The remaining casual and permanent workers are often young workers hired in various ITI-campuses all over India, employed with much less job security and lower wages than the old type of permanent work-force. In the garment factories, skilled tailors working on piece-rate and producing 'full-piece' garments are increasingly put under pressure by chain-systems employing 20 low "skilled" workers to produce the same garment; these chain-systems rest on a division of labour and on the introduction of CNC-cutting and embroidery machines. In Kapashera - a workers' dormitory 'village' where about 200,000 textile workers and families live close to the main industrial area - dozens of 'CNC-courses' and six week basic tailoring courses are offered by small-scale informal schools.

Given this complex picture the majority of workers do not face a single 'company boss' in a formal way, they face many bosses. Due to the real estate boom which catapulted local farmers out of their fields into landlordism and businesses, a specific coalition of the local political class, landlords, labour contractors, police and company-hired local goons became a repressive front ready to quell expressions of workers' unrest. This local front of ruling class is complemented by a faceless front of multi-national investment and central government policies.

OLD TYPE OF STRUGGLES

Under these general conditions, struggles which remain within the boundaries of classical type of company or trade union struggle normally end in defeats and/or institutionalization. There have been many 'union' struggles in Gurgaon in the last years and they seem to follow certain patterns (3) :

There is discontent amongst both permanent workers and workers hired through contractors. In most cases some 'under-the-surface'-struggles pre-date the 'official' conflict, e.g. at Honda HMSI 'spontaneous' canteen occupations happened before the 'official' struggle for union recognition. In this phase certain sections of workers get

in touch with union officials hoping that registration of a union will strengthen their position. Representatives emerge, and member-lists are created for the application process.

The company tries to put pressure on the emerging 'leadership', which, in many cases, provokes a situation where suspension of 'outstanding' workers can be declared. In many cases companies ask the remaining work-force to sign individual letters of 'good conduct', trying to single out supporters. Due to the unions' self-interest they tell workers not to sign: a struggle in classical terms is easier to organize once workers are victimized, although their actual power might be greater once they are back inside the factory.

An unofficial lock-out situation emerges; often workers hired through contractors—who expect less gains from a company union—either enter the factory or additional workers are hired to keep up production. Often these new workers are hired from the local population of surrounding villages - another division between them and the mainly migrant original work-force is created. Companies normally prepare themselves for the lock-out and subsequent problems in production, either by piling-up extra-stock or by getting parts from other suppliers.

'Unofficial unrest' turns into classical forms of struggle, often managed by the main union advisors: protests in front of the factory gate, demonstrations, meetings with political leaders - the martyrdom of workers becomes a stage for leaders. In most cases the conflict becomes a single company issue without attempts to connect it to the wider discontent.

The State and the companies are capable of dealing with these ritualistic forms of struggle, either through repression or through entangling the organization in a long legal dispute. The result of these disputes normally exclude the workers hired through contractors who had been part of the initial struggle and often the legal cases for re-instatement of victimized workers run for years. After recognition of a company union there tends to be silence afterwards (4).

Once they are in the trap of a lock-out, workers can do more than just wait for the next symbolic show of solidarity. In the case of the current lock-out at Maruti fuel-pump supplier Denso in Manesar, 36 union members have been suspended on 17th of February 2010 and about 500 workers refused to sign papers of 'good conduct'. Since mid-February they have been sitting outside the factory while newly hired workers are kept inside for 24 hours. Already before the lock-out Denso had ordered additional parts from its Thailand plant—an act of preparation! In nearby Faridabad, workers of another Maruti supplier, AC manufacturer Sanden Vikas, was 'locked-out' at the same time. The union did not facilitate direct links between these two work-forces. The suggestion came up to write a common letter to Maruti Suzuki management—a rather symbolic sign of workers' coordination which could have had a small impact nevertheless. Another idea came up: for workers to go in small numbers and stand with placards in front of Maruti or other local factories. Denso runs factories around the globe, and so some effort to let workers and management in these factories know about the situation in Manesar could have been made (5). These were small steps which could have helped spread the word and help in creating direct links between-workers of the supply-chain.

This did not happen, and instead people saw one or two union demonstrations of the classical type with bored young workers sitting and playing cards. According to information of a Denso worker, on 22nd of March 2010 the company took back 23

out of 36 suspended union reps and sent all Denso workers on one week's training in a local 'World Spiritual University' ashram, to develop a 'peaceful mind'. When they returned to the factory most of the workers were shifted to new jobs in different departments, at new machines, with new neighbouring work-mates.

New forms of struggle have emerged out of the actual experiences of wildcat strikes and factory occupations that happened in Gurgaon over the last few years. These struggles have remained largely unknown to a 'wider public'. Unfortunately the left activists normally only get to know or are interested in workers' struggles once they have reached the 'official' status, which generally means : when they are repressed. The lathi-charge at Honda in 2005 mobilized the left, so did the murder of a worker at Rico—the main left position concerning these incidents was a 'civil rights' position, not an attempt to analyze the basis for workers' power and self-activity. The struggles of a new generation already give some answers and ask many questions for the future, e.g. how struggles can be extended from the factory base, avoiding 'unnecessary' direct confrontation with the state forces and pitfalls of formal representation.

In April 2006 more than 4,500 temporary workers occupied the Hero Honda Gurgaon plant for several days demanding higher wages and better working conditions. The company cut water and electricity, but told the police not to enter the factory. There was no support from outside the plant. The workers sent a small delegation for negotiations, which was bought off : the delegates returned promising fulfilment of all major demands after restarting production. Then they disappeared and only some of the original demands were actually met by the management. When the factory occupation ended, workers at the Hero Honda supplier Shivam Autotech occupied their nearby plant raising similar demands. Workers at KDR press-shop in Faridabad, who supply Shivam Autotech with metal parts, worked reduced hours during these days.

In September 2006, after temporary workers at Honda HMSI Manesar were not included in a union deal, they occupied the canteen of the plant supported from the outside by the next arriving shift. The company reacted by cutting water supply. The company and union asked them to go back to work.

In January 2007 the 2,500 temporary workers at car parts manufacturer Delphi in Gurgaon went on a wildcat strike blockading the main gate. The company threatened to shut-down and relocate the factory and asked the union of the 250 permanent workers to get the temps back to work—after two days the blockade was lifted. In August 2007 the temps at Delphi struck again for few hours without prior notice, demanding the payment of the increased minimum wage and succeeded. Many of the workers lived together in back-yards of nearby villages, sharing food, mobile phones and information about jobs.

In August 2007, after the Haryana government had increased the minimum wage, over a dozen companies in Faridabad and Gurgaon faced spontaneous short strikes, mainly by casual workers, demanding the payment of the new minimum wage. In most cases these actions were successful (6).

In May 2008, after not having been accepted as members by the permanent workers' union the temporary and casual workers at Hero Honda in Dharuhera went on a wildcat strike and occupied the plant for two days. Management and the permanent workers' union both promised betterment of the workers' situation. The temporary and casual workers then tried to register their own union—a process which ended in suspension of leaders and a mass lock-out in October 2008 (7). It would be

schematic to label these struggles 'spontaneous'. Activists need spaces to meet in the industrial areas for analyzing the social production process and the already existing day-to-day experiences of organisation and subversion within : in factories, along supply chains, in the back-yard living quarters, in the common remote villages (8). If there will be a communist party it will be the celebrations of the collective worker, discovering themselves by turning their social cooperation against its proclaimed precondition : capital. Part of this proletarian self-reflection must be the development of a structure of mutual aid, practical support and coordination.

Notes :

www.gurgaonworkersnews.wordpress.com www.faridabadmajdoorsamachar.blogspot.com

- (1) For debates about the concept of class composition see: <http://libcom.org/history/porto-marghera-%E2%80%93-last-firebrands>
 - (2) There was an article about the wider class situation in India after the crisis blow of autumn 2008: http://www.wildcat-www.de/en/wildcat/83/w83_india_en.htm
 - (3) The list of examples is way too long. Just to mention a few in Gurgaon: Maruti lock-out in 2000, Honda HMSI in 2005, Amtek in 2006, Automax in 2008, Mushashi and Rico in 2009, Denso and Sanden Vikas in 2010.
 - (4) After recognition of the union at Honda HMSI the number of workers hired through contractors and general productivity even increased.
 - (5) It is difficult to rely on the classical union structure for these kind of international links. When the dispute at Rico stopped GM and Ford assembly lines in the US and Canada due to missing parts the comment of a United Automobile Workers official in Michigan was: "We are experiencing the effects of outsourced suppliers, and we hope they would be able to resume production as quickly as possible so we can in turn resume production". Interestingly enough this comment was made after the UAW had signed an agreement to lower wages to 'save jobs', which was disputed by many workers on the shop-floor. While Denso workers in Manesar were locked-out, Denso workers in Tychy, Poland, organized protests for wage hikes matching the wage increases for FIAT workers.
 - (6) Today the situation seems even more explosive, given that the April 2010 'minimum wage hike' of 30 per cent for Delhi workers does not compensate for the enormous inflation of food and transport prices.
 - (7) For video-interview with these Hero Honda workers see: <http://visions-of-labour.org/clip.php?clipid=2458>
 - (8) For concept of 'workers' self-injury' see : <http://limco.org/library/renascence-operaismo-wildcat>
- News from the Special Exploitation Zone
www.gurgaonworkersnews.wordpress.com