BUILDING UNIONS IN ROUGH TERRAIN:

Organizing in the garment and textile sector in Ethiopia

Labour law training for women shop stewards from the basic union of the Industrial Federation of Textile Leather and Garment Workers Trade Unions, Addis Ababa. *IndustriALL*

profile

Union:
Industrial Federation of Textile, Leather and Garment Workers Union (IFTLGWU)
Country:
Ethiopia
Text:
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On 7 March, thousands of textile and garment workers went on strike at Ethiopia's biggest industrial park, Hawassa, demanding better wages, safe working conditions and an end to sexual harassment. The workers were not represented by a trade union, because for the past two years, management at the industrial park has refused to allow unions to organize.

The Industrial Federation of Textile, Leather and Garment Workers Union (IFTLGWU), affiliated to IndustriALL Global Union, has hit a brick wall in its attempts to organize at Hawassa, despite the country's Constitution and labour laws providing for freedom of association.

Ethiopia's economy has grown quickly over the last few years, from an agricultural economy to an industrializing one. The country now has one of the highest economic growth rates in Sub-Saharan Africa. Industrial parks like Hawassa are part of the government's plan to create jobs.

The Ethiopian Investment Commission touts low wages and other benefits to attract investment. The government has set up the Ethiopian Textile Industry Development Institute, and industrial parks have been built across the country to promote light manufacturing. The largest is Hawassa, with the potential to employ over 60,000 workers on double shifts. It is expected to generate US$1 billion in exports.

This developmental state approach aims to create jobs and reduce unemployment, especially among the youth. With a growing population of over 105 million people, and two million young workers entering into the job market every year, the country needs to create more jobs.

Global garment brands and retailers have identified Ethiopia and Kenya as countries to source goods from over the next five years, mainly due to rising costs in countries they have traditionally produced in, like China and Vietnam. Factories in the industrial parks supply to big brands and retailers, including Adidas, Marks & Spencer, H&M, Primark, JC Penny, Phillips-Van Heusen, Tesco, Inditex, Tchibo, Kik, VF Corporation, Schöffel, Walmart, Ober Mayer, George (Asda), Levi Strauss and Hugo Boss.

Unions ask: who benefits from this low cost, labour-intensive, low skill manufacturing model?

Ethiopian workers are on the losing end of the equation. Denying unions access means that wages are low, and workers' rights, including to health and safety and collective bargaining, are curtailed.

The face of the textile and garment sector in Ethiopia is that of a young woman. But at Hawassa, the union is unable to campaign for women workers' rights, including against sexual harassment, for maternity protection and on child care issues. Housing is another issue as many women are forced to share a room, sometimes with more than four colleagues.

Workers at Ayka Addis factory, Addis Ababa. *IndustriALL*

A long way away from a living wage

A recent study by global labour market analysts MyWage and Confederation of Ethiopian trade Unions (CETU), with support from FNV Mondiaal, concluded that a garment worker needs at least 4,130 Birr (US$146) per month to survive, and workers with families need more. **Yet 92.5 per cent of the workers earn less than the minimum required to make a living, with 8 per cent earning below US$35.** The survey, in which 1,052 workers from 52 factories were interviewed, was carried out in Addis Ababa, Oromia and Hawassa.

Minimum and living wages are central to a campaign by the 55,000-strong IFTLGWU, affiliated to CETU. With the current wages most workers struggle to make ends meet and can be described as working poor. A low wage economy means jobs that will neither change living standards of the workers, nor end poverty.

The government promotes 'industrial harmony' - but unions say harmony can only be attained through inclusive social dialogue. To achieve this, the IFTLGWU is working with the CETU, the International Labour Organization, FNV Mondiaal, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, IndustriALL and other partners in various activities that include building union capacity for collective bargaining towards social dialogue.

IFTLGWU is using collective bargaining training as part their campaign for a living wage. Training shop stewards in the textile and garment sector means they can take the fight for workers' rights to their factories.

Raising women's voices

Unions in the country represent only a small portion of the workforce. Only 10 per cent of the country's labour force of over 44 million workers is employed in the private sector and the law does not allow public sector workers to organize. In addition to low unionization, there is poor representation of women workers within the unions.

Even though more than 90 per cent of the workers in the textile and garment factories are women, the union leadership continues to be dominated by men. The IFTLGWU is working towards achieving gender equity and is holding training workshops as part of the strategy.

It is a priority for the IFTLGWU to curb the exploitation of women workers in the factories by supporting women in the garment and textile sector to engage with management. For example, a recent workshop attended by 19 women shop stewards from the workplace unions of the IFTLGWU, with support from the IndustriALL regional office for Sub-Saharan Africa and FNV Mondiaal, aimed to increase women's participation in leadership roles in the unions.

Workers at Ayka Addis factory, Addis Ababa. *IndustriALL*

One of the participants, Gelane Senbetu, a shop steward and women's council member from Kanoria Textile Factory, Bishoftu, says it is important for women to understand the labour laws and the context of collective bargaining in Ethiopia.

"Workshops like these are vital as they focus on how to be actively involved in union work and we identify the issues that we have to deal with in the workplace. We can freely discuss key issues like collective bargaining and how to advance women's interests in the workplace."

"The training has taught us a lot from a legal perspective and has strengthened the women's councils' ability to address women's issues."

A sustainable industrial policy for the textile and garment sector

According to the government's growth strategy, Ethiopia's main competitive advantage is low labour cost. Creating jobs will reduce poverty, and the sector is labour intensive. To support industrialization, the government is developing infrastructure. Roads are being built, airports and railways revamped and extended, and low-cost energy produced. The economic policies also aim to improve social services, including housing, health and education.

Ethiopia's garment and textile sector has benefitted from preferential trade under the United States African Growth and Opportunity Act, as well as the Everything But Arms and duty-free quota free arrangements. In addition, there are bilateral agreements with China and India to promote the sector.

The government is promoting the growing of cotton, although production has remained low. The cotton to garment value chain includes cotton growing and harvesting, ginning, spinning, weaving or knitting, garment making, the traditional hand loom production methods, and shipping. This value chain is dominated by garment companies.

But what does the special focus given to the textile and garment sector mean for factory workers? What does it mean for union organizing? So far, the expected benefits, including skills and technology transfer, have yet to materialize. Unions are concerned that the country will replicate the mistakes of other low wage economies, undermining unions to keep wages low.

The president of the IFTLGWU, Mesfin Adenew, says:

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Increasing membership is an issue we deal with daily. We will not be deterred by hostile employers and state institutions that deny us access to factories and industrial parks. The large number of non-unionized workers means that there is a lot of potential in organizing, and we are working with local and international partners to overcome the challenges.