

Why are Sri Lanka's Free Trade Zone Unions unable to fight for better working conditions?

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In October, a series of FTZ (Free Trade Zone) workers who manufacture clothes for international markets such as the US, tested positive for COVID-19 in Sri Lanka. FTZs are [populated](#) with women from rural areas who, undermined by poverty and limited opportunities, are 'pushed' rather than 'pulled' into jobs in the textile industry. Workers were already exposed to multiple tiers of exploitation, but the pressure of COVID-19 worsened their circumstances and put 50,000 workers at risk.

As a response to two consecutive waves of COVID, several unions such as the Ceylon Industrial Workers Union (CIWU), Dabindu Collective and Standup Movement [mobilised](#) on behalf of workers. They pushed for basic assistance such as an allowance, access to testing and the maintenance of OHS standards when workers returned to factories. However, these demands are quick solutions to the most pressing concerns. None of these measures seek to uproot the exploitation which is at the heart of the FTZs.

FTZ unions have not been able to improve the conditions of the textile industry for a variety of reasons. In post-Independence Sri Lanka, trade unions have been co-opted by political parties. Union actions such as strikes have been crushed mercilessly by the state since 1977. Consequently, union membership has been limited. Women who are still the majority of workers in the FTZs are curtailed by male authority.

Workers' voices have been erased, but they need to be at the centre. As Historian of Labour and Gender, Beth English [recommended](#) "workers must shape and initiate strategies for their own empowerment."

Unions have been co-opted by political parties

The Universal Franchise in 1931 created a climate where the state responded to unions which centred on workers' rights. A series of strikes from September 1945 to June 1947, in both the public and the private sector achieved holiday leave, compensation and superannuation benefits which workers continue to benefit from.

In the post-Independence period, Sri Lanka's main political parties, the SLFP and UNP set up trade unions linked to their political parties. Writer of 'Status of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of Sri Lanka', Balasingham Skanthakumar [noted](#) that these political unions had three primary purposes. They acted as footholds to control workers when in power, were "useful vote banks" in the election period and "broadened popular appeal beyond the dominant social forces of which these parties [were] representatives."

These political parties promised opportunity, advancement and capital through the political sphere

which superseded the workers' focus on a collective class.

"As these political parties alternated in office, so too did the fortunes of their trade unions ebb and flow, as workers floated from one to the other to avoid political victimisation, to seek favours, or both," Shanthakumar [noted](#).

The main political parties, particularly the SLFP also absorbed Leftist parties such as Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and CP (Communist Party) into coalitions.

"By June 1964, the political representatives of left trade unions were in a short-lived coalition, with the same regime they had been opposing on the streets a few months before. The illusion of power trumped principle, and the committee's 21 demands, along with working-class independence, were sacrificed," Shanthakumar [wrote](#).

The co-optation of trade unions by political parties is still in practice:

"They are not open about it but a majority of trade unions leaders have political connections. Several unions have an ulterior motive in their operations," Former FTZ worker and Executive Director of the Standup Movement, Ashika Dandeniya told us. "Workers are sick and tired of this."

Unions have been crushed by militancy

From 1956-1977, the labour movement's post-Independence momentum had quietened because of political co-optation. When J.R. Jayewardene became Prime Minister in 1977, he unleashed authoritarianism and centralised control over the country and in the process terminated workers' voices.

Jayewardene crushed the labour movement in the General Strike of 1980. Dr. Devaka Gunawardena [described](#) this as an "assault [which] mirrored the neoliberal assault on organised labour in other countries occurring around the same time."

Workers [demanded](#) a monthly wage increase of Rs. 300 (Rs. 10 per day) and an allowance of Rs. 5 to pay for the cost of living. Using their majority in parliament, the UNP suppressed the opposition parties and the trade unions who supported them. When nearly 400,000 workers staged demonstrations outside their workplaces, pro-UNP trade unions and armed mobs attacked protesters. In one instance, a bomb killed an important union member and injured six other people.

The state threatened to 'sack' workers if they went on strike. They also announced a 'state of emergency' and converted a series of services such as transport, healthcare and education to 'essential services' to ban the strike.

Nevertheless, nearly 100,000 employees joined the General Strike of 1980 which undermined administrative functions and daily services. In response, the state suspended the July salaries of strikers. Trade union offices in state property were closed and sealed. The strikers were told to return to their posts before 23 July but when 40,356 employees did not return, their jobs were terminated.

"The trade unions lost dedicated leaders who had to take up self-employment of various forms as they had been blacklisted by employers. The combativeness of the working class was drained," Shanthakumar said about Jayewardene's expulsion of the most active unionists from the workforce.

Jayewardene's militancy to the labour movement has also been the trademark response since 1977. Large-scale demonstrations have mostly been used as only the last resort for severe changes. The

best example of this were the [Worker Protests of 2011](#)—a response to a parliamentary bill which tried to remove retirement benefits for all workers with under 10 years of employment. While workers managed to stop the bill's progression, the police opened fire on the protestors. Four workers were shot and one man died from his wounds.

The absence of a solid labour movement has resulted in work practices which do not consider the context and circumstances of workers, particularly women workers. For instance, women who were 'pushed' into FTZs were pushed back into the role of 'village wives'. Sandya Hewamanne's [research](#) for the 'Journal of Third World Studies' revealed that many former FTZ workers would have preferred to remain in their jobs even once they got married. But they had no support mechanisms to counter hesitation by employers and other socio-psychological factors.

Unions are hard to access

In December 1999, parliament passed an amendment to the Industrial Disputes Act—unions could be set-up if they had a membership of 40%. In March 2003, Free Trade Zone Unions and the Industrial, Transport and General Workers' Union merged together to form the Free Trade Zone and General Services Employees' Union. However, many factories ban the membership of a union in practice. A [study](#) by the 'Journal For Developing Societies' revealed that ½ of workers reported the prevention of unions in their places of employment.

Workers are encouraged to [use](#) 'Workers Councils' as an alternative to trade unions to voice their concerns. 'Workers Councils' are modelled on unions and act as spaces for discussion and resolution. However, only workers who are loyal to the company are chosen which position workers against each other to stifle criticism even further.

"We were asked about our snacks (for example, our tea bun) and about waste reduction. We never talk about money or methods to make work easier," Dabindu Collective Program Co-ordinator Chamila Thushara told us. Thereby, discourse is carefully moderated and moderators merely pay lip service to concerns.

⅔ of workers indicated the desire to join a union but could not because the 'outside' cannot access the inside of factories, the inconsistency of schedules and extensive hours which limited union action.

"No one can enter FTZs. Workers can enter them but unions cannot enter them. Workers are geographically separated from those who try to promote workers' rights," Dandeniya told us. "It is very hard to develop a trade union atmosphere inside the FTZs."

Unions have a crucial role to play as mediators between employers and employees. A [study](#) by the 'Journal For Developing Societies', reported that 58% of participants faced at least one instance of unfair treatment by their employment.

"I had a fever. I even fainted at work," R. Rathnayake, the first COVID patient in the Brandix factory revealed in a [local publication](#). "I learned later that a senior officer had scolded and criticised me for being hospitalised for chest pains, claiming there were shipments pending,"

Supervisors continued use of 'tried-and-tested' tactics such authoritative management style and a strict chain of command have had consequences. Without a space for honest discourse or worker-centric mediators, the very measures used to increase productivity have been counterproductive in the midst of a pandemic.

Men still hold the reins

In his paper for 'Trade, Labour and Transformation of Community in Asia', Dr. Janaka Biyanwila [touched](#) on 'male deals' in FTZ factories. Women have been withheld from the trade unions because of a series of 'male deals' between unions, employers and the state. Why do men hold positions of authority in an industry dominated by women?

"Look at the trade unions. Not a single woman in a leadership position," Dandeniya told us. "Why are men so intimidated by women as leaders? Why can't they give us an opportunity?"

Dandeniya recalled an experience from November where members of various trade unions set up a conference called the 'Working People's Power'. The Standup Movement received an invitation because of their actions to raise awareness over the past couple of months.

"The trade union leaders sat on the main table but did not let any women join them. We were not allowed to talk and bring our voices forward," Dandeniya said about the positions these men held as gatekeepers. "The world is changing but these men are so regressive."

"When we questioned these men about the decision, they questioned the legitimacy of our 'union'. Apparently, we were not a real trade union and so they did not see the point of making space for us. We were annoyed by this because it was dismissive of all our hard work over the past couple of months."

Dandeniya believes that these male leaders actively prevent women's leadership. Meetings held late at night or in distant locations act as obstacles to union participation. Moreover, most of these unions failed to adapt gender sensitive approaches such as flexibility and consideration for care work.

Build alliances

Workers, like Dandeniya and Thushara are part of [hybrid form](#) of NGO-Unions who run welfare activities, raise awareness and even organise strikes. Unlike old, male-led unions, these NGO-Unions should use the COVID-19 as an opportunity to pull workers' voices into the centre of their actions.

Workers, themselves, should create alliances inside FTZs. Presently, they are dependent on company policy. Their treatment depends on the factory they are recruited into. Workers should be able to rely on the enforcement of their rights over company policy. So-called 'reputable' factories routinely use loopholes in their policy to sidestep obligations and continue to perpetuate the modes of exploitation. With this particular route, workers have the opportunity to model tactics which consider their industry's context and subject specific details.

FTZ Unions should also look to form alliances beyond the boundaries of their factories, demarcated 'zones' and the textile industry. Women from Sri Lanka's main [export](#) industries such as tea and domestic services (particularly in the Middle East) "occupy the bottom rung in the occupational hierarchy; and have the lowest wage structure within each of the economic activities." They should unite to cross-reference actions and use their "associated bargaining power" (as Dr. Biyanwila [noted](#)) to drive legislation, policy and enforcement practices.

Workers should also create a nexus of union actions throughout the country which have been borne as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is the perfect opportunity for women from a variety of social classes to unite to create a movement to amplify their collective oppression.

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