

Mumbai: WSF supporters bring adverse effects of globalisation to the fore

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Mumbai: There was grim determination on the faces of the 500-strong crowd that marched through the streets of this western port city for the World Social Forum's Global Day of Action on Saturday.

Defiantly, they carried banners that read 'Another World is Possible'. The slogan – familiar enough in this city, which hosted the WSF in 2004 – has a special ring to it because memories linger of a year-long strike in 1982, by some 250,000 textile mill workers, which failed.

Since then most of the workers have been squatting in and around the mills hoping to get adequate compensation from their employers, their perseverance attracting much attention from activists who descended on Mumbai from around the world for WSF-2004.

But the final blow for the workers/squatters was to come two years later in March 2006 when a court ruling allowed the 60-odd textile mills to sell away the 600 acres of land they stood on for 'development' in the shape of shopping malls, luxury residential towers and commercial buildings. The stated policy, to turn Mumbai into another Shanghai, has no room for marginalised workers.

"With the closure of the mills, thousands of workers have been rendered destitute and forced to return to their villages or end up as hawkers and contract workers," said one of the marchers, Datta Ishwalkar, leader of the GKSS (Textile Workers' Struggle Committee). "The manufacturing process has shifted from factories staffed by the organised working class to sweatshops in the unorganised sector run by contract labour who are denied all union rights." Prominent among the marchers was Shanti Patel, trade unionist and a former mayor, who pointed out that most of Saturday's marchers were young industrial workers who were taking the brunt of globalisation. "If unions in the textile industry were responsible for basic workers' rights such as an eight-hour day, today's young labour force has been deprived of all such rights," Patel said.

Down the memory lane

As the demonstrators wound their way through localities associated with the city's history, and their route took them past monuments to the country's struggles, the significance of the chosen route was inescapable.

The procession started at Shivaji Park. It marched southwards through Girangaon or 'city of mills', birthplace of the same Left movement, which thrived in the textile industry that defined Mumbai as an industrial city in the 19th and 20th centuries.

A final rally at Chowpatty beach was ironical because it was the site of many public meetings organised by the ruling Congress party during the freedom movement it led against British colonial rule. It was the same monolithic Congress party that broke the Left movement in Mumbai and is today backing the sale of mill land and the evictions of unemployed mill workers.

Saturday's demonstrators walked alongside floats depicting the crises facing Indian people today: the foreign onslaught on the local retail sector, the conversion of textile mill land into a real estate

windfall, the evictions and the demolition of slums and the spate of farmers' suicides in Maharashtra.

"At the very least the workers rendered jobless should be given housing as the mill land that has been sold to the real estate lobby does not even belong to the mill owners," said Ishwalkar. "It took years of struggle for the government to promise housing for dishoused former mill workers. But the land that they have assigned is not enough to accommodate all of them. They have also promised that unemployed mill workers will get jobs in the malls coming up on this land. But they are dragging their feet; we don't know when this will be implemented."

Adverse impacts of globalisation

The government policy of encouraging "hire and fire" contract labour in the name of labour reform is exemplified by the "special economic zones" being set up to compete with China's industrial boom.

The adverse impact of globalisation and the primacy of the market are visible in the struggles by farmers, workers, Dalits (low caste people) and tribals across the country as they fight to protect their lands, livelihoods and resources. They have opposed the government's stamp of approval to over 600 special economic zones (industrial islands free from all trade unions, tax and other requirements) across the country.

"India's retail sector is facing the onslaught of national and multinational corporations which will lead to the destruction of livelihoods of over 40 million people in the country," said V. Shetty, lawyer and coordinator of India FDI Watch, an organisation spearheading a national campaign against foreign direct investment (FDI) in the retail sector, and the Vyapar Rozgar Suraksha Samiti (Committee for Protection of Livelihoods and Retailers), a coalition of small traders, hawkers and workers.

"Multinational chains have started selling vegetables at predatory prices, threatening the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of hawkers who make a subsistence income on this work. And Indian companies like Reliance, Godrej and the Birlas open retail outlets and lure middle-class customers with prices that are below cost, running 'mom and pop' stores out of business after which they can hike their prices sky high," said Shetty.

"The ground realities are in complete contrast to stated government policies of not allowing FDI in the retail trade. Walmart, the largest company of any kind in the world, is slated for entry into India in 2008, in a joint venture with an Indian company," he added.

The national policy for farmers was announced in November 2007 in response to a spate of suicides in Maharashtra when faced with mounting debts and an agrarian crisis as regards small and marginal farming became unviable. "Will the national policy help farmers and save farming?" economist S.P. Shukla, a former member of India's Planning Commission, asked sceptically.

"More than half the population of the city lives on just eight percent of its land," said P.K. Das of the Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti, a housing rights organisation. "They live in abysmal conditions, without clean water and other basic amenities. Instead of improving their conditions, the government of Maharashtra has been demolishing slums and handing the land over to builders through various corrupt schemes."

"Slum dwellers' insecurity about their rights to this housing makes them vulnerable to the promises of political parties," said K.T. Suresh of the Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action.

India boasts the world's second-fastest growth in high net worth individuals, but the same country also has some 300 million people earning less than a dollar a day. And nothing can be more telling than the fact that for all the vaunted economic growth India actually dropped from 126 to 128 in the United Nations latest human development index.

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* Source: IPS.