RESTRICTURING ECONOMY : FOR WHAT?

Since the new economic policy has been announced, several changes in the industry are taking place at a breakneck speed. Whether it is voluntary retirement or disinvestment in public sector, privatisation or closure of sick units, freezing job avenues, shifting the production to small scale sector, proposal for revoking labour legislations or contracting out jobs, the looser at the end of the day is not only going to be the labour but also the country.

At almost all possible forums, the need to change labour legislations has been voiced by the industry. The crux of the demand is that industry should be given a free hand in dealing with labour, without any restriction imposed by any legislations. Even the Government is promoting such ideas which will give boost to management's high-handedness. In June, Madhya Pradesh Government presented a paper in a seminar advocating that units employing less than 50 workers and run by power or units employing less than 100 workers running without power should be exempted from any labour laws.

Similar trends are there in other areas such as retrenchment of workers. In almost all the public sector units, Central Government has stopped meeting the working capital requirement, hence making these profit making units sick for no fault of theirs and as an implication throwing thousands of workers jobless. It is estimated that from public sector units alone, about 300,000 workers will be thrown out of jobs in the coming 3-5 years. Out of 246 Central PSUs, only 59 are incurring losses but all of PSUs are made to incur losses. For example, for the first time in history, Indian Tourism Development Corporation of India has registered a financial loss of Rs. 5 crores this year, due to the faulty voluntary retirement scheme pushed by the Central Government.

This I.M.F. ordered restructuring of economy is something very similar to the restructuring thrust down our throats by British East India Company, when thousands of weavers were displaced to create the market for British cloth. Britshers were arguing for conglomeration of industrial production due to the technological advancement which had taken place at that point of history. The reverse of that process is taking place today again due to the same logic of technological advancement. The modern technology has made it possible that the same quality cloth can be produced at small scale, but still be controlled by the big business empires. As a result, the production is contracted out to small scale producers, while trading rights are concentrated in the hands of big companies. The irony of today's situation is that the Indian Industries (which are being slowly converted into contractors of multinationals) are also arguing for this restructuring, without realising the long-term implications of such changes.

In this background, it is interesting to note that at the annual meeting of OECD in 1978, member countries came up with a new economic model which could prevent the collapse of the Northern economies. This model suggested that instead of capital-intensive production processes, countries should go in for labour intensive production processes which could then be shifted to Third World countries, due to the cheaply available labour-force.

The direction of changes taking place in the economy in general is primarily geared towards earning foreign exchange. Which means our priority is to no longer produce for the local market but to supply to other countries. To meet the needs of the local market we can always depend upon Transnational corporations, which will first buy out the goods produced by Indian labour force and then supply it back to the Indian consumers.

Till recently, one could say that the apparent priority of the Government was the electorate which gave them the mandate to rule but now it is the foreign multinationals, foreign capital, foreign consumer and foreign opinion.
Spotlight—Tragedy of Wholesale Trade Workers

Nagadevi Kamagar Sabha

In 1991, workers working with the wholesale traders of Bombay established Nagadevi Kamagar Sabha. These workers on Nagadevi Street were members of the Mumbai Kamagar Sabha. They were fed up with it. They established their own union to represent their interests.

Most of the leading activists are workers themselves. Learning through struggles and fighting against odds, they are going ahead and gaining strength.

If one gets down at Masjid Station (Bombay), anyone will tell where the Nagadevi Street is. This is a well-known area of wholesale traders. There are many such areas. Mirror Galli (chilli lane) has whole-sellers and producers of spices. All over Bombay, thousands of workers are employed by whole-sellers in such areas.

Turnover of hundreds of crores of rupees takes place with the help of these workers. But if any worker gets hurt, there is no first-aid facility. The Government must be collecting crores of rupees in taxes alone from the Nagadevi Street, but the Government does not do anything so that the Employees State Insurance Scheme becomes applicable to these workers. There is not even a special insurance scheme by LIC for them.

Many workers are not recorded anywhere as being employed at a particular shop. Recently, a shop owner dismissed some women for becoming members of Nagadevi Kamagar Sabha. He has records showing that a cooperative is doing the job of producing spices for him. No one had heard about this cooperative till the union reached the labour court. The shop inspectors are not compelling owners to keep proper records of the workers employed.

There are neither records, nor any control over wages and to add to it, the work is really back-breaking. Inspite of all these problems, the workers are ready to fight it out to the end.

Their strength is the democratic functioning of the union and the fact that they are led by worker activists, as well as their self-respect.

Acknowledgement:

Mr. Bhanse, had to rush the material and comments late at night. Mr. Kalyanide, and the worker activists encourage me and gave their comments. Bringing out this issue could be possible only due to all of them.
goods. There are different teams of these pullers. They share their earnings at the end of the day. On an average, they earn Rs. 30 to 40 per day. But on Sunday, the shops are closed, so no earnings for the hand-cart pullers. All these workers are covered by the Shop and Establishment Act (SEA).

This Act applies to shops, restaurants, small factories, hotels, institutes, maintenance workers of lifts and many other places, even to some offices. Women working in grading or packing of spices are also covered by this Act.

In Bombay alone, according to the estimates of the Labour Department, around one million workers come under this Act. Proper registers are not maintained by the employers. Concerned Inspectors do not inspect the registers. There are complaints of corruption about this. In such a situation, who will care about OSH problems? The Government officials? Or the employers? The union of the workers will have to look into this problem.

Many workers from Nagadevi Street were members of another union for about 20 years. However, they feel very strongly that the earlier union had neglected them and sided with the employers. They formed Nagadevi Kamgar Sabha (N.G.S.) affiliated to Hind Majdoor Sabha (HMS). The earlier union is also affiliated to HMS. Today, the employers are not ready to negotiate with the union of workers called NKS.

NKS is a militant union. The activists are in day-to-day and live contact with workers. Excepting a few, all the activists are workers themselves. They have got very good friends in competent and enthusiastic lawyers. Activists are constantly helping workers about their complaints. They attend court cases though they have to take leave and exhaust their quota of leave.

NKS participates in other causes such as Nammancha Bachao Andolan, demonstrations against firing at Chattisgarh, agitation about closed textile mills.

The problems discussed in one of their study camps are quite indicative. Functions of union and strategies of employers, what is women’s liberation (56% members may be males), health problems caused by work, importance to democracy in unions, qualities necessary for a union leader, problems faced by Adiwasis residing in the National park, the Ashray Colony in Bombay, SE Act, Rights when arrested, Indian Penal Code, etc. were the problems discussed.

In the introduction itself, one worker introduced himself by explaining ‘I have been working in the shop for many years. Our present boss was but a child then. I used to take him on my back and play with him. He threw me out of job and did not even give any reason”. He continued: “can I get an alternate employment at this age? No! But he is not bothered about it”. Another worker said: “The employer and his henchmen asked me to sign some papers. I refused. They beat me with sticks. I did not sign the papers till the end”.

The workers and NKS are working in the face of such repression. The police in connivance with the employers have filed many cases against workers and activists. Thought it is difficult work, they continue steadfastly in their own union. The activists are determined to face whatever hardships come their way. They are used to a very hard job and real heavy work.

SITUATION AT WORK

I saw a nut-bolt shop. This is comparatively a bigger shop of about 1400 square feet. The place for sitting for the employer, the custodian, their cushioned chairs covered about 500 square feet out of 1400 square feet. Rest is covered with gunny bags full of nuts-bolts, rows and rows of these bags; a balance and a place for sorting the nuts-bolts. Workers work in this area. There is no proper place to sit if any worker is tired. There are 7-8 and sometimes ten bags in a heap. Workers take out bags and nuts-bolts for sorting them and packing them as per orders received.

Their hands are full of grease. This grease comes from the nuts-bolts manufactured in Ludhiana, Pune and so on. This grease enters the nails which is very unhealthy. I did not find any proper place or brushes to clean this grease before eating.

Taking out nuts-bolts from gunny bags is pretty heavy work. Suppose one has to take out nuts from the fourth bag in the first heap. This is comparatively easy being the first heap. To do this, one has to take down the first three bags before taking down the fourth. But that is not enough. There is often another heap adjacent to this particular one. Some bags from this second heap have to be taken down. Otherwise this second heap may collapse. The place is very congested and even other heaps may collapse because all the heaps are leaning on each other. For removing nut-bolts from one bag, one may have to shift 7-8 heavy bags weighing 50 kg each.

When there are more orders workers have to lift many bags on that day. At the time of stock-taking work, the load is very heavy.

Some shops supply even 100 bags a day to customers. Even though we are seven workers in the shop each of us has to lift at least 100 bags and sometimes, even 150
bags in a day. Bags in our shop [pipe fittings], weight from 35 kg to 90 kg each, said a worker. There are shops supplying iron bars which may weigh even up to 200 kg per packing.

One can imagine the effect if a bag or a bar slips and falls on a toe or foot. In case of such workplace accidents, there are no first aid facilities. One worker complained: 'One and a half years back, my foot was hurt. There was a wound, though not very deep. But my foot got swollen as iron filings had gone in the wound. Due to the infected wound, pus and swelling, the boil was operated upon by doctors. I spent 300 Rupees and was on leave for seven days. But the employer did not pay me a single paisa'.

The shops should have the facility of cleaning wounds and bandaging them. At least the person who is hurt should be taken immediately to a hospital. Boxes are packed with iron strips. Rust is quite constant and even the packages are scratched. Workers, who have worked for 10 to 15 years, complain about pain in the back and the neck. This problem is not negligible if one considers workers in other wholesale trading areas of Bombay, the head leaders and the construction workers.

PACKING OF MASALA (SPICE)

Many women work as packers of masala. Grounded masala comes in bags to the packers. The bag is emptied on the floor. Four to five women sit around this heap of masala and start filling small plastic bags and card board boxes. The work rooms are small and fans are constantly needed due to the heat in Bombay. The masala powder fills the air in the room.

Masala enters the nose, mouth and softens the exposed parts of the body. In the humid atmosphere of Bombay, it sticks to the body and irritates. You can imagine the scene when chilli powder is packed.

Women here, complain about digestive problems and burning sensation in the stomach. Some complain about bleeding inside the mouth. It is noticed that women workers do eat frequently. They have two or three heavy meals. This, in frequency, may be increasing the problem of irritation due to acid released in the stomach.

HAND-CART-PULLERS

Hand-cart pullers have no protection; they do not get pay slips or monthly salaries. Recently, one clerk in a shop was dismissed due to joining NPS. He could at least approach the labour court. Hand-cart pullers have no such protection. They have neither sickness allowance, nor annual medical leave.

There is a completely hand-to-mouth existence. They earn something to buy food only when their hands pull the carts. If one person is ill and absent from work, her/his earning is zero and one has to spend additionally on medical treatment and medicines. If one works when ill, the illness increases. There are around 2000 such workers on the Nagadevi Street only.

The possibility of accidents is very high on roads with heavy traffic where Manali cars and rash drivers zoom past them at high speeds. They do not either get immediate attention after an accident, nor do they get compensation from employers if claimed. Even the hand-cart pullers have to lift weights like the monthly paid workers.

LIFTING WEIGHTS

Lifting weights has certain effects on the human body. Muscle men aim at making their bodies strong by lifting weights. Muscle builders are awarded titles such as Mr Bombay and Mr India. In Olympics, in Asia, gold medals can be won by lifting weights. These are some good effects of lifting weights.

Can workers lift weights as do the body-builders who build their muscles in a scientific manner, or may be with music in the background and also very good nutrition? Workers are forced to lift weights by bending side ways and forward and in a confined space and under the pressure of finishing work fast. Workers have to push heavy bags, snatch them and pull them in an unscientific manner.

Actually workers who lift weights for 15 or 20 years in such a manner and will continue to do should be given gold medals.

All of us know that this results not in gold but in severe back pain. But if one goes to a court, one needs support from scientists. The following portions are based on information published by ILO in its encyclopedia on OSH.
BACK-ACHE

While lifting weights, one has to reach forward or sideways in Prefixes awkwardly positions. Most often, arrangements are not proper. Actually, it is always better to keep the back bone as straight as possible. Work has to be organized according to the principles of ergonomics.

If the first episode of strain in the back or neck was due to bending or to the left then, after some days, pain will recur when similar actions are repeated. As days go by, the frequency of recurrence may increase and later, may become constant.

Please make a note of the action which resulted in pain for the first time. We can attempt to avoid such actions. It is true that in the given work space, and pressure of work and the state of legislation in India, little can be done to avoid back pain.

MASALA

In grinding and packing of masala, women workers come into close contact with fine powdered masala. This powder settles on the thin membranes of the mouth, nose and eyes. Inside the mouth, the membrane is always watery. This powder blends more with a watery background and may also reach the throat, food pipe and stomach. Chilly and pepper are the most troublesome powders.

Some persons may be affected due to the swelling of eyes as in conjunctivitis. Masala may cause allergic dermatitis.

If teeth and mouth are not clean enough then their ill-effects are more. Some bags of masala may also be carrying fungus. This enters the air and then the mouth. Unclean mouth and teeth are favorable conditions for the growth of such fungus. If pain swelling is already there then the possibility of fungal infection increases. Irritation of thin membranes of stomach is also possible due to the exposure to Masala.

Precautions need to be taken to clean the teeth and mouth - before work, before lunch and after lunch and also when the work is over as well.

THE LAW

SHOP AND ESTABLISHMENT ACT

Section 39 is about cleanliness. This states that establishment shall be kept clean of any drain or other nuisance.

The workmen’s compensation act

This Act applies to even contract workers whose job is necessary for running of the business of the employer. This law clearly applies to permanent workers.

If hand-cart pullers get injured while working they can get compensation under this Act.

In Maharashtra, Section 38A of the Shops and Establishment Act clearly states that workers covered under the SE Act are automatically covered under the Workmen’s Compensation Act.

One can make use of this law in case of accidents during the course of work for the employer.

This Act can be used in cases of diseases due to work such as back pain due to lifting weight in confined spaces and in improper positions due to lack of proper facilities.

In some shops workers do the job of cutting formica sheets according to the needs of buyers. There is a possibility of accidents due to the saw used. Formica is a chemical belonging to the class of chemicals - phenolic amino resins. The dust of formica may cause problems.
KEEP RECORDS

Please do keep records of injuries. The cause of injury, the medical treatment, the period of leave and the expenses incurred. In case of diseases also it is useful to keep records - when did the problem begin, e.g. bleeding in mouth in measles packing or back pain due to a particular position.

It would be better to show this record to the doctor who treats you. This record will be useful if you decide to claim compensation.

EMPLOYERS AND COMPENSATION

It seems difficult to earn due compensation from these employers. See what happened in one case. A worker was injured while working. Medical expenses were high. The employer paid the bills. When the worker resumed work - he started deducting Rs. 200 per month towards medical bills. In addition the worker was forced to sign some papers. (Most probably saying I would not claim compensation or some such statement).

Let us see the example of medical leave. At some places the union has successfully negotiated 40 days annual medical leave. Forty days salary is paid at the end of the year. The year ends in March every year.

A worker was ill in May 1992 for five days and his salary was deducted. On top of this, he had to pay his medical bills from the already little pay packet. While this 5 days salary would be given in March next year after 10 months. Sometimes workers have to take loans for medical bills. They pay interest on it. Actually what the employer should have done is to just mark him absent for 5 days in May 1992 and keep adding leave period of all the months. If the total leave crosses forty days only then can he deduct wages.

An employer stated me "why do you say I have to pay full salary in May? I am going to give 40 days wages at the end of the year, so it is one end and the same if I pay now or later". If it is really one and the same he should pay now without any argument. But he doesn't because it is favourable for him to pay later.

Suppose 2000 workers take one day leave on an average in the 1st month with 70 Rs. a day. The cut in wages is 1,40,000.00 Rs. This is an advance given to employers for a year and that too without any interest. When workers take loans they sometimes pay 10 paisa per rupee per month that is at the interest rate of 120% per year. And the employers get an advance from workers without any interest. Prices rise every year. Even every month they are rising. Five days leave may mean Rs. 350 today but after a year the things which can be purchased for Rs. 350.00 are lesser that today.

So we should tell employers "if it is all the same pay wages for leave NOW".

ESI SCHEME

One remedy is Employees State Insurance Scheme. In this scheme workers get medical benefit, women also get maternity benefit and compensation can be claimed in case of accidents while working and for diseases caused due to work from the ESI Corporation.

The ESI Act states that if any State Government passes a resolution then the law can be extended to any category of workers. The Rajasthan Government by notification on 20th September 1973 extended ESI Act to the workers covered by SE Act.

ESI Corporation has enough funds to take of workers in shops and establishments. The corporation has 1100.0000 Rs. in savings with itself. Now ESI is extended to employers earning Rs. 3000.00 per month. ESI Corporation is going to get much more funds now.

ESI corporation has representatives of unions on its national, state level, executive bodies. HMO also has its representative on this body.

Many workers in NKS come from district Saurashtra, Sangli and Kolhapur. They can pressure MLA from those areas as well as MLA from Bombay to see that ESI is extended to them.

In Gujarat there is a special insurance scheme for workers in shops and establishments.

Workers in other states also can ask for such a scheme for them.

If we impress upon MLA; ESI we may get good schemes. We have to keep records of accidents and illnesses and try to get compensation as well as a safer healthier work place. We are bound to do this. Because though employers make profits it is our back which pains. To save our health we have strengthen our union and move ahead.
WAGES

A note by an activist.

From 1st April 1965 workers on Nagadevi Street are getting following wages and allowances.

1st April 1966.

a) Basic Pay - Rs. 105-5-145 - 7.50-130-10-250

b) Dearness Allowance - Rs. 2 for per 10 points above the index 630 points.

In 1971 - Dearness Allowance changed to Rs. 2.50 for per 10 points above 630.

1979

a) Basic - Rs. 105-7.50 - 165 - 10-225 - 12.50 - 360

b) D.A. - Rs. 3 per 10 points for per 10 points above 630

1983

a) Basic Rs. 105-10-165-12.50-230-15-410

b) D.A. - as earlier

c) House rent allowance Rs. 25 p.m., Travelling native place Rs. 200 per year.

1987

a) Basic - 105-12.50-165-15-260-17.50-615

b) D.A. - Rs. 3.50 per 10 points above consumer price index 630 points.

c) House rent allowance Rs. 50 per month, Travelling Rs. 500 per year.

Bonus: The minimum bonus according to the Act is 20% of the basic salary.

It is true that workers are getting above salaries. But after having a union for 25 years they have not got rights such as gratuity, medical allowance & other social security benefits.

Workers in this area have struggled and got gratuity up to 2 months salary sometimes even two and half months salary.

Yet, many employers do not pay according to the above cited agreements. Workers struggle against such employers but the employers are helped by the unions which act as their agents.

MIRCHI GALLI:

In some masala companies men get the above wage mentioned levels but women workers are not given the same wages. Women are not getting any dearness allowance. Nagadevi kamgar Sabha is struggling for equal work equal wages.

WORKERS WRITE

CASE I:

India became independent in 1947. We are citizens of India. But we are not free. Though we work hard, we are duped. Every union can dupes us. We should have workers as workers representatives. That is why, we have taken our own Nagadevi Kamgar Sabha.

The employers do not keep records and deceive us. Please keep yourself record of service. In case of gratuity some workers are paid paltry amounts. Do not get deceived. Meet our activists and get what is due to you. Be confident.

We do not want any favour or hand-outs. We want our rightful dues.

CASE II:

I am working in the mills for the last 20 years. Out of these 10-12 years; I had been active in the earlier union. This Mumbai Kamgar Sabha neglected us. So, we decided to stand on our own feet and established our own union- NKS.

Today, textile workers in Bombay are passing through a very bad period. Mills are closed. I have participated in the struggle for reopening mills in Bombay.

My colleagues complain about back pain, pain in the neck. Our salary is insufficient. At least we have our own organisation. We have very good legal advisers. They are our friends. We will fight continuously for justice.
Various types of occupational injuries and related claims for compensation are brought to our notice, regularly, at the ‘Occupational Health & Safety Centre - Bombay’.

While a worker of ‘The Bombay Pot Trust’ complained of impotence after treatment of his hip bone fracture sustained at his workplace, another worker form the ‘Main Sewer Division’ of Bombay Municipal Corporation went ‘sterile’ due to chronic exposure to certain unidentified toxins found in sewers. Yet another personnel working for a private X-ray equipment manufacturing firm continues to suffer from burning sensation and tingling numbness in fingers, even after skin-grafting, displaying radiation burns.

Respective trade unions sought compensation in all the above cases and the labour commissioner’s office referred, in turn, to the ‘Workmen Compensation Act’ - requiring the so termed ‘PERCENTAGE DISABILITY’ of the occupational injury - for any resolution.

Thus, the above cases return to the concerned Doctor in Government & ESIC hospitals for assessment of ‘percentage disability’ with reference to the ‘W. C. Act’.

The ‘W. C. Act’, however, provides no guidelines whatsoever in any of the above cases or for that matter in hundreds of other conditions like Silicosis, Byssinosis or Hepatitis B.

We are back to a familiar situation. The Authorities requiring to appear impartial insist on an objective assessment of percentage disability with reference to a standardised government document - namely the W. C. Act. The W. C. Act provides no guideline and the doctor have no option other than providing a ‘Subjective Opinion’, however qualified.

Thus, the stage is set for another group of authorities (Medical in place of judicial) to take over the task of interpretation of the ‘percentage disability’ of unlisted occupational injuries and diseases while the worker awaits elementary support for survival, leave alone social justice.

Just in case a specialised department does provide an assessment in some rare instance, it has to await its turn to be considered by Medical board consisting of specialists from all over India which, of course, meets only twice in a year.

The Medical Board as another specialist body is in any case known to revise the assessment of the other specialists on the basis of so called empirical personal experience for lack of objective norms.

After all these institutionalised waiting periods and processes of expert opinions and specialist interpretations, the assessment (being after all subjective) is liable to be challenged by the concerned management with it’s battery of medical and judicial experts - all expenses paid - in the court of law.

The affected workman, if they are still alive, are by now lost in the labyrinth of dispute centering around the ‘percentage disability’.

Establishing objective norms for assessment of ‘percentage disability’ for the occupational injuries and diseases not already covered by the ‘W. C. Act’ has therefore become an urgent social imperative.

The humanity engaged in some work or the other for survival - whether they are production workers, service staff or computer professionals (for that matter even Medical personnel) developing objective compensation norms for occupational injuries and diseases have become a critical criteria of assessing the quality of human civilisation.

The State and the government who, apart from being responsible for the welfare of the people, also have to be ultimately perceived as being impartial with a sense of social justice and take the lead in developing these norms and expectantly take the assistance of professional associations like - Association of Surgeons (ASL), Voluntary organizations like OHS, Trade Unions, Progressive managements, Legal bodies and Social Scientists in this modern era of multi-disciplinary specialties. Dr. V. Murdock (Occupational Health & Safety Committee - Bombay)
Electronic Monitoring of Workers: Spying on the Workforce

US unions report that electronic monitoring of the workforce is taking a "devastating toll" on workers' health. As many as 26 million workers may be under computer surveillance in the USA.

Pat C is a Data Entry Keyer for an oil company in California. Like 60 workers in her department, she is subjected to electronic monitoring.

This can include keystroke monitoring, typically covering gross numbers of keystrokes, number of minutes on the machine, gross keystroke rate per hour, number of jobs per keystroke rate for each job, and the number of corrections of errors, with a comparison figure of the average rate of the whole office. Summaries are prepared monthly.

Monitoring results are posted publicly, as well as being put in each employee's personnel file. Keystroke rates and correction rates form the basis for disciplinary action. "Slats are like the Bible," says Pat. "People are called into the boss's office and told they will be demoted or let go unless their keystrokes are brought up. Or they will leave you a note saying 'Either get your keystrokes up or get out'."

Because of the open comparison of keystroke rate, including public posting, workers are forced into competition with each other. According to Pat this "creates a dog-eat-dog atmosphere. You can't be friends with a co-worker."

Pat has seen the stresses and strains of this job take their toll. "You bring it home with you," she says. A number of her co-workers are experiencing physical problems, including carpal tunnel syndrome (a nerve disorder caused by repeated hand motions). Pat is also concerned because her supervisor has stated that she wants to get rid of the older workers and hire young girls who can handle the stress and pressure. "Monitoring is a form of rape," Pat declares. "They have taken everything off of me and they can see everything."

Linda H is a Data Entry Operator for a manufacturer in Minnesota. Weekly printouts of keystroke monitoring distributed to each operator contains the "slats" on all the other operators. Says Linda, I found this report very humiliating. I didn't like the fact that everyone else in the department knew how many errors I made. I thought this information should be kept between me and my supervisor. The operators were expected to limit their errors to five a week, although they processed hundreds of invoices each day.

Linda tells us, "As a result of those high expectations and knowing I would have a report about my work every week, I became terrified of making an error. I began to stare constantly at the screen of my terminal checking and rechecking my work to see if I could catch any errors. I began to suffer from very bad headaches and took six aspirins a day to try to relieve those headaches. Finally, the tension became unbearable and I started having severe back pains. The pain became so bad that I had to go to a doctor to receive physiotherapy. I decided that the pain wasn't worth it so I quit that job even though I was making a good salary. I don't think workers should be judged solely by the cold hard data of a computer printout. As a worker, I want to be treated like a human being not a machine.

Linda has testified in support of legislation to regulate monitoring in Minnesota.

From: Stories of mistrust and manipulation
9 to 5
Working Women Education Fund
514 Superior Avenue
NW Cleveland
Ohio 44113 USA
(Sighted in Worker's Health International No.33, Sept. 1992)
Industrial disasters kill thousands of workers every year. Seventeen people died on 30 October, 1948, in Donora, due to the poisonous mixing of smoke and fog. Similarly, 89 people died in Meuse river valley in Belgium in 1930. But the worst disaster till now was in London on December, 1951 when 400 people were choked to death and then the Bhopal gas leakage at Union Carbide plant, which resulted in the death of 2500 innocent people. For most of the disaster, blame is put on the carelessness of the workers, but the analysis of 216 industrial disasters indicates a totally different picture. Out of these, 15.5% were due to faulty plant installation and construction, 49% due to operational faults, 32% due to human error and 3.5% due to sabotage.

The leakage of ammonia gas took place at 11.50 a.m. at the Panipat plant of National Fertilizer Limited. The deadly gas leaked out when the maintenance staff were replacing the defective safety valve in the ammonia gas pipeline in the urea plant. The official version says that the gas which was being transported from the main supply to the urea plant was stopped by a suction valve so that the repair work could be undertaken. However, the suction valve suddenly broke down and ammonia enveloped the persons replacing the safety valve. The leakage continued for more than 20 minutes. Help could not be reached due to the clouds of ammonia and the lack of coordination among the fire fighters and the concerned officials. A total of 11 workers died and many around twenty were injured.

NFL has now constituted an inquiry to find out whether the pump under maintenance failed due to fatigue or material fault. Haryana government has also constituted a committee under the Deputy Director of Pollution Control Board to find out the cause of this disaster.

NFL has the history of many such incidents. Three months ago, there was a gas leakage but since there was no human loss, no steps were taken to avoid such incidents in the future. This incident is a proof of the fact that every accident cautious us before coming up as a disaster. There were at least eight workers involved in the repair of the valve and others in the general cleaning of the shopfloor. As the gas leaked with a heavy sound, the workers involved in the repairwork had no chance of escaping from this disaster. Others in the shopfloor tried to run for their lives. One of them, trapped in the machine, died immediately. The NFL is the recipient of the National Safety Council Award for attaining 3.19 and 3.26 million accident-free working hours, the year 1986 and 1991.

After every 10 to 15 days, these valves choke and there is no system of regular monitoring. Usually, workers are made to wear the masks before entering the leak-prone zone. However, Mr. S. N. Jain, the Managing Director of NFL, claimed that for this particular job, masks were not needed. A worker disagreed with Mr. Jain and said that this tragedy could have been prevented if the workers would have been wearing masks. "This whole plant, like all fertilizer units, is like a bomb with all the ammonia inside and all of us working inside are playing with fire. Masks or no masks, death is chasing us all the time."

NFL has a very small regular workforce and most of its work is done by the casual workers employed through contractors. There are workers who are on the contract list for the last nine to ten years. On one side, permanent workers earn around 2-3 thousand rupees per month (of course, this includes the overtime) the workers on contract basis get only 900 rupees only. There is a small health centre maintained by NFL, but the contract labourers are not entitled to it.

Under the Indian Factory Act, every company dealing with hazardous materials must have a disaster-management plan. Even if the NFL says (on paper) that they have such a plan, this accident shows that there was a total chaos during the gas leak.

NFL violated its own safety procedures. Where it is very clearly written that "extreme care must be taken by observing proper handling methods and using protective equipment to avoid ammonia gas and to prevent liquid ammonia coming into contact with the body tissues, particularly the eyes."

"For work where there is considerable hazard of extensive spills of liquid ammonia, a complete rubber suit, face-shield with rubber gloves and boots shall be worn."

"Rubber gloves and alkali-proof goggles must be worn when working on pipes and equipment containing liquid ammonia."

**OVERLOADED FACTORY INSPECTOR**

The enforcer of Factory Act, i.e., Factory Inspector, is overloaded with the industrial units. It is understood that one factory Inspector should not have more than 150 factories but the following table shows that how much some are overloaded:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>1011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gujarat</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haryana</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Himachal Pradesh</td>
<td>992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jammu &amp; Kashmir</td>
<td>506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerala</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**OH BULLETIN**
WHAT IS AMMONIA?

Qualities: soluble in water, colourless, easily liquified gas, with a very sharp characteristic odour:

TLV; OSHA: 50 ppm; 35 mg/m³
NIOSH: 50 ppm; 5 min cell.
MAC USSR: 20 ppm/m³.

Ammonia is present in small amounts in the air, water, Earth, and particularly in decomposing organic matter. It is the product of normal human, animal and plant metabolism. Muscular efforts and excitement of the nervous system result in the formation of an increased amount of Ammonia; an accumulation of which in the tissues would result in poisoning.

INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION: The industrial production of ammonia is based on the use of nitrogen and the organic compounds of nitrogen in coal and peat. Coal contains about 20% of nitrogen, which is partly converted to ammonia (up to 25%) by dry distillation and absorbed in baths of water or sulfuric acid. Now, a days, all coke ovens are fitted with the apparatus designed to extract ammonia in exhaust gases. The principal method is now the Haber-Bosch process, or its modifications, which basically consists of synthesis of hydrogen and nitrogen. The mixture of nitrogen and hydrogen is passed through a complex catalyser, under the pressure of 200-1000 atmospheres and a temperature of about 600 degree centigrade.

SAFETY MEASURES NECESSARY FOR HANDLING AMMONIA

Ammonia production and its handling is characterized by several fire and explosion hazards. Rules must be followed very strictly in the maintenance of the plant. All parts of such plant must be equipped with general and local exhaust ventilation and warning systems. Adequate measures should be taken for explosion prevention and fire-fighting. All the workers involved in the production process must be supplied with the proper filter type respiratory protective equipment. The cleaning and maintenance must be done with the supplied air breathing equipment and a safety belt and a tie. The second worker must remain on the outside in order to help in case of an emergency.

Blast Kills 45 in China

On September 11, due to a blast in a coal mine, 45 workers died in Changchun province of China. According to China News, this blast was in the transport section of a mine. The approximate number of injured was around 29.


5 Workers fell unconscious in Murdabad

This leakage occurred at a factory in Thakurdwara Kishore area of Meerut, in which five workers were seriously injured and admitted to hospital whereas many fell unconscious.


Two persons died due to ammonia gas leak in Ludhiana

Two persons were killed and 30 others were seriously affected as a result of leakage of ammonia gas from one factory on Shastri Road in Ludhiana.


17 Die in Ukrainian Explosions

Explosions caused by a gas leak-up in an Eastern Ukraine coal mine killed 17 people. Officials revealed the explosions occurred at a depth of 1,300 meters.


160 Trapped in Building Collapse in M.P.

About 160 labourers were trapped when the roof of a building under construction in the housing colony of the Gas Authority of India Limited collapsed at Vijapur in Guna, Madhya Pradesh.

Indian Express - September 11, 1992.

4 Indian Crewmen of tanker ship dead

Four Indian crewmen of a tanker ship died and three injured after inhaling toxic gas. The accident occurred about 600 km north of sea from Cape Town.

Indian Express - September 12, 1992.

Fire in Factory

Fire broke out in a factory manufacturing cologne in Bakraswagur in North-West Delhi. The fire was controlled and there was no casualty.


"Two Scientists Killed While Testing Arms Project"

An explosion in the Armament Research and Development Establishment in Pune, killed two scientists who were testing an armament project. The ARIE is a premier unit of the Defence Research and Development Organisation. An inquiry has been ordered into the blast.


"Five Asphyxiated to Death in Septic Tank"

Five persons were asphyxiated to death while clearing a septic tank inside the ethanol production facility at Pilibhit (Uttar Pradesh).

Indian Express - September 13, 1992.

"Workers Die Due to Injury in Fire"

Two workers were killed when a fire broke out at a fire in Delhi. The fire was caused by a short circuit in the electrical wiring.

Indian Express - September 13, 1992.

"One Killed in Delhi Train Collision"

A goods train derailed in Delhi, killing one person and injuring eight others. The train derailed due to heavy rain in the area.

Indian Express - September 13, 1992.

"12 Killed in Taml Nadu Cracker Unit Blast"

Twelve people were killed and forty injured in a cracker plant blast at Nayaraparamaiyidai in Tamil Nadu. The explosion occurred when some workers were making rockets in one of the sheds of Bharat Fireworks.

Indian Express - September 15, 1992.
Workers' Participation in Health and Safety: A European comparison (by David R. Walters)
The Institute of Employment Rights
98 1st Pancras Way, London NW1 9N2, England

This booklet is a result of a working party established by the institute to look at the questions of health and safety. The aim of this publication is to examine the statutory measures for representation in workplace health and safety in Britain, in the light of development at the European community level and provisions and practices in other EC member states.

Plunder
PARTIZANS
218 Liverpool Road
London N 1 1 LE
England

This book is a direct product of efforts during the 1970s to share information about 'resource wars' that multinational mining corporations were undertaking on native lands. Organizations like PARTIZANS (People against RTZ and its subsidiaries), England; the Aboriginal mining information centre, Australia; the Centre for Alternative mining Development, Policy, Wisconsin, USA; have been in the forefront of an international network, providing information and analysis of multinational mining corporations to those directly affected by the operations. In this way, the native communities, who are otherwise isolated from the centers of political and economic power can form effective links with environment, labour and human rights organizations in the union territory of the multinational corporation.

Plunder gives a rare glimpse into the neo colonial mindset of RTZ as well as some of the community based organizing efforts to defend native land rights, worker's health and the environment from corporate greed.

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