

REPORT

'Nokia' Agitation

By A Correspondent

[Makkal Mandram (People's Forum) Kancheepuram, a human rights group active in Northern Tamil Nadu organized a protest on 3rd November 2010 at Kancheepuram Collectorate Office at 10.30 am demanding action against Nokia for Ambika's death.]

On the 31st October (Sunday) at around 6.50 pm, while working at a loader and unloader machine in ENO final assembly section, a worker named Ambika met with an accident and later died in the night. She was 22 years old, a permanent employee and had been working at the factory for past 4-4.5 years.

Ambika worked on assembly line machine which loads panels into a magazine rack which then moves through a conveyor belt into a blade (metal box). Once the rack locks into the blade, the blade moves up to the second level conveyer belt which unloads the mobiles from the panels on to the conveyer belt. The system is closed loop and works through sensors. For each cycle, 100 mobiles (4 mobiles in each panel and 25 panels in a rack) are produced. The sensor senses the panel from the lower level conveyer belt and moves the blade from the top level conveyer belt to the lower level belt. In case the conveyor belt gets stuck and the sensor does not work, there is a provision for an opening through which the magazine rack can be pulled from the stuck position. This technical glitch is to be sorted out by a trained technician. There is also a small door on the blade which has to remain closed at all times while the machine is functioning. Next to the door is an emergency button, which when pressed would bring the machine (or the metal box inside) to a halt or an 'ideal position'. But if the door to the machine is open, the emergency button gets obstructed and difficult to reach.

On the fateful day, while Ambika was working on the machine, the conveyor belt got stuck and the sensor stopped functioning which was not uncommon. For past 4-6 months, out of the 25 such assembly line machines (new machines/models), 8 machines have been regularly getting stuck about 20 times a shift due to malfunctioning of the sensors. A problem repeatedly being brought to the notice of the technicians and the line managers by the workers for past several months.

When the machine gets stuck in this manner repeatedly while in operation, the workers normally pull the conveyor belt themselves by sticking their head inside the machine (under the metal box). They prefer to rectify the problem themselves instead of calling the technicians since they are constantly under production pressure and cannot afford to lose 10-15 minutes time waiting for the technician to come. Therefore, as a common practice and knowledge of the line managers and technicians, the workers themselves, open the door to the machine or keep it open while the machine is in operation (which is supposed to remain closed) and pull the conveyor belt.

When Ambika stuck her head under the metal box to pull the magazine rack the belt got unstuck and the sensor started functioning and automatically the metal box came down to load the panels. The process was fast that before Ambika pulled her head out, the metal box fell on her head and neck. The machine got stuck again and Ambika's head remained stuck inside. Ambika could not reach the emergency button since the door was open and had obstructed the button. Someone later pushed the emergency button but that didn't help as the blade comes to the ideal position which is where head was. The only way, it could have been stopped was by stopping the power which no one had access to at that point.

The workers on the next assembly line realising what had happened called the technicians and line managers, who came and for 25 minutes could not figure out how to get Ambika's head out. In those precious 25 minutes Ambika started bleeding from her nose and mouth and lost consciousness. It later emerged that her neck (spinal column) got crushed under the metal box. The workers asked the technicians to break the machine, but the line managers said that the machine was too costly (while Ambika stood there with her head inside the machine, in excruciating pain bleeding to death). Finally after 25 minutes, with the help of a technician who brought tools from elsewhere Ambika's crushed head taken out. She was taken by company ambulance, after some first aid in the factory, to a local hospital— Jaya Hospital at 7.30 pm. From there she was taken to Apollo Hospital near Kilpauk Medical College Chennai at around 8.30 pm. Around 12.45 am(though the night watch man had claimed she dies by 11:55PM), Ambika died and later her body shifted to Apollo hospital in Greams Road.

15 minutes after Amibika was taken out of the machine and taken to the hospital, the technicians rectified all the faulty sensors, cleaned the blood from Ambika's machine and the line managers ordered all the workers to resume work. When the workers refused to resume work, too distraught and agitated after the accident, the line managers told them that the company will incur loss of lakhs of rupees and they will have to face the consequence of it. It was also alleged that all machines were fit with a sensor which will stop the process when anyone put their hand in after this incident.

After the work halted during third shift also, the management gave off to the workers on 1st Nov' to avoid any confrontation. The workers informed, that while fatalities like this has not happened before, there has always been a risk since the machines were not functioning properly and despite their complaints it was not rectified. And due to production pressure, the workers were risking their lives, which was a common knowledge amongst the technicians and line managers. The workers said that hand injury was common in the stamping room, where regularly fingers of the workers gets crushed/injured inside the stamping machines. Due to high production pressure, the workers keep on working like machines on these assembly line. For instance, in a day the production target for Model 1616 is 40,000 pieces, which the workers have to meet at any cost. For some models, it can be 12,000 pieces etc, depending on the model.

Ambika came from Pindithangal village, Kalvai in Vellore District of Tamil Nadu. Daughter of an agricultural labourer, she has one younger sister and a brother who is studying in a local polytechnic. She was the only secure bread winner of the family. On 1st Nov' the HR manager from Nokia visited the hospital and offered some gratuity to Ambika's parents, which were refused by the trade unionists and workers present at the hospital.

From talking to the workers it seemed quite apparent that this accident was waiting to happen due to the negligence of the management and the intense production pressure on workers. If not a sweatshop, these factories are not any better. A worker jokingly mentioned, 'our factory is the biggest producer of Nokia mobiles and our pay are the lowest'. (There is 45 times difference between the pay of Indian Nokia workers and what Nokia pays globally).

The Nokia management immediately declared a holiday on 1st November as it feared that the distraught and disturbed workers would start an agitation.