

Calcutta Notebook

DRC

Workers at the Calcutta Leather Complex went on a three-day sit-in from December 13, 2010, to protest against terms of service and working conditions. One remembers their fight in 2002-03 for the survival of the industry. The tannery owners had for long violated all norms of pollution prevention, evil-smelling effluents were in evidence all over Tangra, Tiljala and Topsisia in East Kolkata. Finally, the supreme court instructed all tanneries to be shifted to the complex being set up near Bantala, further eastward, by Dalmia of cricket management notoriety, under the aegis of the state government. The court's instructions were flouted, the owners alleging incompleteness of the complex. While recriminations between Dalmia and the state government quite rent the air, the Supreme Court closed down the tanneries, rendering 45,000 workers jobless.

Now, most tanneries have shifted to the complex, which houses 200 of these with a total strength exceeding 10,000 workers. 90% of the workers are casual, temporary or on thika contract. A 10-12 hours working day without overtime is common. There is no job security and no provision after retirement, no provident fund, pension or gratuity. There is no employees' state insurance, and no compensation is offered for injury or disablement while working. Minimum wage norms are ignored. Movement of workers inside the complex is restricted. Their cycles or bikes are not allowed at the main gate (gate no2).

Although it is not a SEZ, the tannery-owners flout all labour laws and it is tough setting up a union. There has been an attempt to put together a complex-wide union instead of factorywise unions.

Dalmia has abandoned the complex even before minimum amenities have been provided for. There are no lights inside the tannery module at night and practically no sewerage. One is often ankle-deep in slush and waste water. There is no facility for drinking water. Despite a clear directive by the supreme court, no hospital has been built for the workers of the complex.

The demands of the agitating workers include job security and work all the year round, a 8-hour working day, need-based minimum wages, provident fund and retirement benefits, ESI and other social security benefits.

On 8th November, a number of workers brought out a procession to protest against Obama's visit to India and an effigy of the US President was burnt at gate no 2. On 12th November, the workers met at George Bhaban to discuss the impending movement with friends and sympathizers.

It may be added that West Bengal is an important state in the all India reckoning of the leather industry. The state has a large turn-over of livestock and produced 8% of India's cowhides and 11% of its goatskins. Also, Bihar and UP send hides to tanneries in West Bengal. Bata (India) Ltd has India's largest tannery. Then, there are around 500 small, family business concerns in East Kolkata. The largest of these is, however, quite large—Taj Leather Works, worth 70 lakh US dollars.

Kolkata is the origin of 65% of all Indian leather goods exports and 90% of leather gloves exports. Being so heavily dependent on exports, Kolkata's leather industry was hard hit by the world slump.. Especially affected were the 250 odd leather factories still operating

illegally along the south suburban railway lines. Many employees were thrown out of these sweatshops in 2009. These are small factories with a maximum of 50 workers in good times. A large section of employees are boys and girls, taken out of school to cater to the demand for soft hands in the glove factories. However, periodic slumps in exports and loss of employment are the rule, witness the leather complex workers' demand for work all the year round. □□□