

Report

Conditions unbearable for workers at the Top Text Garment Co. factory

Suspicious of human trafficking of migrant workers at the Al Hassan Industrial Estate in Irbid-Jordan

Jordan Labor Watch

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Sunday, 12th February, 2017

Conditions have become increasingly unbearable for migrant workers of Indian and Bengali nationalities at the Top Tex clothing factory in the Al Hassan Industrial Estate in Irbid-Jordan. Unable to go on enduring the amount of abuse and rights violations to which they have been subjected over the years by the company's management, the workers have organized a strike to protest the quality of their working and living conditions, in the hopes that public attention will be drawn to their plight and that a solution can be found. Since the strike was launched roughly two weeks back, however, the company's management has failed to heed the workers' complaints, instead opting for a crackdown, with authorities likewise failing to fulfill their duty to protect the workers.

Upon interviewing the workers and visiting their quarters, Jordan Labor Watch has been able to confirm that they are indeed living in abject conditions, and that the company's management has escalated its rights violations since the strike was launched. The Jordanian Ministry of Labor, furthermore, has also not taken any action, in spite of the evidence of systematic violations, which have been reported by both the workers and the Ministry's inspectors.

Shortly before the strike, supervisors had demanded that workers double their production rates from 40 to 80 pieces of clothing per day, which was blatantly unattainable. When workers refused to meet these unreasonable quotas, as they had already reached the limit of their capabilities, they were subject to verbal harassment and salary cuts, which prompted workers to file a complaint against the factory supervisors. The following day, four workers were summoned by the company's administration and told that they were being deported for encouraging their colleagues not to comply with the management's demands, threatening to accuse them of theft if they caused any more trouble. Shortly thereafter, the strike was launched.

One worker stated that, in the course of the present strike, the workers were reiterating the same demands that were made in the course of a strike launched in August 2016 – demands which, though modest, still went unheeded. Last year's strike ended with the signing of an agreement between the workers, management, and the Ministry of Labor, providing for the improvement of working and housing conditions. Yet, it was reported that the company's management had yet to abide by what was agreed upon.

Workers are demanding an end to verbal and physical abuse, to which they are constantly exposed by the company's management, who ceaselessly urge them to work faster. Recently, management has largely abolished overtime, forcing workers to produce ever larger quantities within the regular work hours.

Another worker claimed that, out of a desire to cut costs, the company had been harassing workers and forcing them to produce more within regular work hours, to avoid paying overtime. According to him, smoking and bathroom breaks had been restricted, and the situation was getting worse by the day.

While asking workers to increase production, management has failed to provide them with better and more varied meals. Though the employment contracts clearly indicate that management must provide three meals a day, workers claim that they are often forced to buy their own food, due to the small size and variety of the meals available. Daily breakfasts consist of a small piece of bread and an egg; lunch is limited to lentil soup and rice, and sometimes small portions of chicken, beef, or fish; and dinner is made available to workers in their quarters between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, in spite of the fact that some work until six or eight in the evening. Workers claim that the food, which is thus left unattended, cools off, and sometimes contains insects by the time they get back to their dorms.

Housing conditions, too, are deplorable. While workers' quarters are supposed to be a place of rest and comfort after long hours of work, they are severely unmaintained. Drinking water is stored in plastic containers which are left on the floor, and isn't always available. Additionally, there is no kitchen, no televisions, and no wardrobes (for male workers), which forces workers to randomly hang their clothes around the dorms.

Workers' quarters are located two kilometers from the factory – a distance which workers have to walk every morning and at the end of each work day, with no transportation to protect them from the elements. The factory's management does not provide coats, bedsheets, or pillows, while knowing that there exists only one small electric heater in each room and no fans to be used in the summer. In addition, the ceilings leak, and no clean housing, health, and hygiene supplies, such as soap, are provided.

Due to these conditions, workers commonly fall ill, especially in winter. Despite the fact that the employment contract requires the factory to provide workers with comprehensive healthcare, the factory clinic only dispenses headache medicine, at best, and workers are told to resort to private healthcare, at their own expense. The company's management also does not provide sick leave, and workers' absences, even if justified, are deducted from their pay.

According to several male and female workers, when the current strike was launched, the company's management cut off electricity in the workers' quarters for roughly 40 hours, leaving them unable to turn on their electric heaters in spite of the low temperatures. Water is also said to have been cut for two days, making the bathrooms difficult to use and forcing workers to satisfy their needs for hygiene elsewhere.

Workers have criticized representatives of the Ministry of Labor for being unfair, and failing to pressure the company's management to abide by the agreement reached last year, or enforce labor standards. Management has gone 5 months without taking action to abide by the agreed-upon terms, and workers fear that, without action from the Ministry of Labor, this will never happen. Some have even stated that the Ministry has sided with the management in dismissing the workers' demands.

As for the Union of Workers in the Textile Sector, which represents them, workers have stated that it has limited itself to urging that they return to work, without offering to find solutions to their predicament. Originally, they claim, the Union presented the deportation of the four workers as the only solution; now, in light of the administration's demands, it is calling for the deportation of nine workers. In short, the Union has failed either to mediate negotiations or represent the interests of workers.

When asked whether they had attempted to contact their embassies, workers replied that they had, to no avail. Indian workers claim to have attempted to contact their embassy several times, only to be told that they cannot help, or simply hung up on. After launching the strike, 15 Indian workers rented a bus to take them to their embassy, where they tried to file a written complaint. The embassy, they claim, was not interested in hearing what they had to say.

As for the Bangladeshi embassy, while workers claim that it initially attempted to negotiate with the company's management, when negotiations failed, workers were simply told to return to work. As one worker stated: "There are common interests between them, and their priority is to maintain investment. In fact, they are only looking out for their own interests, and no one cares what happens to the workers."

The question, then, seems to be: What forces these workers to remain under such conditions? Why don't they simply quit their jobs and return to their countries? Because these workers paid recruitment agencies in their countries between 500 and 400 US\$ to be able to work in Jordan. Since the majority of them come from very poor backgrounds in their countries, they were forced to borrow the sums requested by their recruitment agencies – debts which they are paying with their current salaries.

It is worth pointing out that there have been suspicions of human trafficking going on at the factory for over a year. However, no conclusions have, to date, been drawn, and no provisions have been put into place for the protection of the workers.

Jordan Labor Watch now urges the enforcement of decent work standards, that violations be stopped immediately, that no workers be deported and that they be allowed to return to work. In addition, an independent investigation should be carried out into the conduct of all official bodies and staff involved.