

# BusinessLine

## What the garment workers are saying

NARENDAR PANI



Speaking up For themselves K Gopinathan

*Trade unions are doing precious little for women in the workforce, especially young, migrant women*

The protests by thousands of employees of Bengaluru's garment export industry last month had all the features usually associated with workers' agitations, including violence and police firing. On the face of it this would appear to be no more than an unexpected return to the days before the decline of the trade union movement. But such a kneejerk reaction would ignore the more fundamental changes in the concerns of the workers and the nature of their protests.

In the pre-liberalisation era workers would rally behind trade unions who would in turn be primarily concerned with issues in the workplace, particularly wages. In contrast, the workers in Bengaluru came out on the streets spontaneously, and the issue that provoked them was quite substantially influenced by their lives outside the workplace.

### Shunned by policymakers

That the scale of these protests surprised most observers is a commentary on just how much the urban worker has been ignored in recent decades. Despite employing several hundreds of thousands of workers in Bengaluru, the garment industry has typically been ignored by policymakers in a city that likes to identify with its IT success. The high degree of feminisation of the garment exporters' workforce and their aversion to trade unionism has pushed this industry further into the background. Any upgrades in the conditions of labour have more to do with the insistence of western buyers of their garments than pressure from trade unions. And since western labour standards apply only to the workplace, there is a sharp distinction between the workplace and living conditions.

The extent to which workers are ignored by the government came into sharp focus in the attempt to alter policies towards the Employees' Provident Fund. As the government saw it, PF is the major financial asset of the workers. To ensure that this is not withdrawn for frivolous purposes the government decided that the amount should be used to create an annuity, and withdrawals would be possible only after the retirement age of 58.

The young women saw things very differently. Whatever the official figures about life expectancy many of them were not confident that they would even live to the age of 58; and if they did it would not be for too many years after that retirement landmark. They did not then see themselves living to benefit from their PF being converted into an annuity. At best they would be saving for their entire lives in order to get a pension for a few years.

### A strange idea

The idea that savings should only be for a pension in their advanced years was also quite foreign to their way of life. Their sense of security comes from crossing several milestones at different stages of their lives. No matter how gender unequal the traditional system of marriage may be, there remains a strong feeling among young women workers that getting married would provide them some sense of security.

Young unmarried women workers in the industry have been known to accept terrible living conditions, even as they work in labour-standard-compliant workplaces, in order to earn and save modest amounts that can contribute towards the funding of their marriage. To be suddenly told that these savings would only be available to them when they were grandmothers, challenged the very basis of their coming over to the city. It was no surprise that they poured out on to the streets to express their protests.

In these relatively brief protests they emphasised a fact that tends to be ignored by trade unions and policymakers alike: There is a substantial difference between the effective protection of workers' rights and the success of trade unions. As the new urban worker seeks to build her career by changing jobs, she has little use for a trade union that is

confined to a single workplace. At the same time, as she negotiates a city she has migrated to, she is confronted by a number of urban issues, including finding a place to stay and travelling from that place to work.

These challenges are not confined to the lower wage segments of urban workers. The concerns of urban workers have thus necessarily shifted beyond the workplace to the challenges of living in a city. If trade unions cannot cope with the change, Bengaluru's garment workers have demonstrated they have other ways of making themselves heard.

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