

The Aekta Project: Organising garment workers in the West Midlands, UK

BRIEFING SUMMARY

The clothing industry in Leicester and the East Midlands has recently come under scrutiny. In response to concerns about working conditions in small garment factories and workshops, the Ethical Trading Initiative commissioned research which highlighted low pay (£3 an hour), lack of health and safety, absence of employment contracts and other abuses. The workshops are supplying new internet fashion companies and established high street retailers. The majority of workers are women from Indian and Bangladeshi communities, or from Eastern Europe.

It was a similar picture in the West Midlands in the 1980s when a shift towards faster flexible fashion led to a growth in small factories and workshops employing mainly Asian women workers, under appalling working conditions. The Aekta Project was established in 1985 in response to this exploitation, to support clothing workers to challenge the power of their employers. While recognising it could not perform the role of a trade union, the overriding strategy of the Aekta Project was to help to create a situation in which workers were collectively represented, and able to take collective action.

Much has changed in the intervening 30 years, but the resurgence of fast, cheap garment manufacturing, increasing hostility to non-British born workers, and a government once more seeking to roll back employment rights means that the lessons of the Aekta Project are now more pertinent than ever.

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In the 1980s a 'new' clothing industry was emerging in the West Midlands. Small enterprises and workshops were popping up on the site of older, larger disused factories. These workshops were producing clothing quickly, cheaply and flexibly - but the workforce were paying the price. In 1984 the West Midlands Low Pay Unit published evidence that as many as 20,000 people were working in this 'new' industry, most on illegally low wages and some earning as little as £1 an hour. West Midlands County Council agreed to fund a project to monitor the industry and campaign for better pay and conditions. This was the start of the Aekta Project.

Trade unions were all but absent from the workshops. Trade unions faced outright opposition from employers, and some workers feared union membership in itself could lead to dismissal. Trade unions traditionally struggled to organise in smaller firms, preferring to focus their resources on bigger companies with more employees. Moreover, union officials tended to be white and male, while this garment workforce was largely female and Asian - they needed support from women who understood their lives in order to build their strength.

The Aekta Project recognised that employers were exploiting the vulnerabilities of their mostly female workforce. Many of these women were poor, spoke English only as a second language, experienced gender and racial discrimination on a daily basis, and simply saw no alternative to accepting the low pay and appalling working conditions that were common in the local industry. There were also many homeworkers in the industry, and some women moved between homework and workshops as their circumstances changed. The Aekta Project had to work hard to build up trust amongst these women, and to develop their confidence and belief in their power to change things. The project drew staff from the

local community, based its office in the heart of the clothing industry, and distributed information to households, outside workshops, and outside local gurdwaras. They used networks within the Asian community to spread their message and reach out to women.

The project focused on three main areas of work: the provision of information and advice, casework and campaigns. Workers were provided with information on their rights - on wage rates, sick pay etc - as a starting point for questioning their poor terms of employment. They were encouraged to visit the project office where they were also provided with advice on wider topics including benefits entitlement.

The Aekta Project supported workers in pursuing cases against their employers where they had been cheated and wished to take action. The project adopted a principle that the field workers should conduct any casework themselves, rather than hand it on to other agents who would not have the same relationships of support, trust and solidarity with the women workers. This casework served a number of purposes, it provided the employee with an opportunity for remedy, it could discourage similar abuses in the future, and news of successful cases spread quickly through the community, alerting others to their rights. Moreover, the project also used the casework as a basis for organising, forming supportive groups of friends and colleagues around the individuals who were taking cases. Finally, the cases exposed gaps in the system which could be highlighted through Aekta's campaign work.

Aekta campaigned for better enforcement of legal wages, and the payment of sick pay. When the Wages Inspectorate, who were at the time tasked with enforcing wage rates, responded inadequately to worker complaints, Aekta launched a campaign, 'Bad Bosses Let Off the Hook'. Despite the then Thatcherite government's strategy of eroding rights at work, ministers were nevertheless persuaded to grant workers the new right of taking a wage complaint to Industrial Tribunal. Aekta was then able to support workers in building cases to make the most of this new route.

The Aekta Project also took a number of cases where workers were not receiving sick pay. Despite the fact workers were entitled to it, and that their employer could recoup the cost from Government, some employers were simply not willing to process claims. The inaction of the DHSS (the government department with responsibility for sick pay) led to another campaign. Aekta secured a ruling from the Industrials Tribunal that non-payment of sick pay constituted an illegal deduction of wages, while simultaneously campaigning for the DHSS to improve its enforcement activity.

Nevertheless, the project never lost sight of the fact that Industrial Tribunals could only ever deliver partial justice for workers, and that fighting for individual rights was one step in the process of building collective strength. This was all the clearer in a political environment where employment rights were being dismantled one by one, all in the name of deregulation.

Within its first three years the Aekta Project won the confidence of many women workers, established women's groups that met regularly to discuss employment problems and support one another, secured significant tribunal victories (leading to some

employers paying at least the legal minimum to their workforce), and encouraged the establishment of a Clothing Manufacturer Federation to raise standards in the industry. The project built strong links with local unions, but resistance from employers and other persistent obstacles meant that there continued to be little union presence within the workplace.

In recent years new concerns are being raised about another 'new' clothing industry. Once again the drive for fast fashion and more flexible production is leading to growth in UK garment production. Once again concerns are being raised about serious labour rights violations, health and safety risks and the exploitation of a vulnerable workforce. The Ethical Trading Initiative commissioned research into the garment hub of Leicester, with the subsequent report revealing that the majority of workers are paid well below the minimum wage, and do not have employment contracts, while many are subject to late payment of wages, unhealthy working environments, abuse and bullying. These workers are a combination of women from Asian communities, and newer - sometimes undocumented - migrants who are, if anything, even more vulnerable to exploitation. Once more UK garment workers need the kind of dedicated, determined and sensitive support that the Aekta Project provided to women workers thirty years ago.



FURTHER INFORMATION:

Other briefing notes in this series, as well as more information about this case study, are available in the Resources section of the HWW website.

REFERENCES:

Clothing Workers in the West Midlands Find Their Voice: The first three years of the Aekta Project, Raghieb Ahsan, 1988

The Clothes Showdown: The future of the West Midlands Clothing Industry, Anderson, Bahia, Davies, 1991

New Industry on a Skewed Playing Field: Supply chain relations and working conditions in UK garment manufacturing, Nikolaus Hammer, 2015

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chains, lobbying for better laws to protect homeworkers, and building solidarity with other women workers.

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