

Non-binding morals? Working conditions in the globalized textile industry

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There was a lot going on last week at ECCHR concerning working conditions in the textile industry in South Asia and the factories that produce goods for the German market. I had initially thought that I should write here again about the urgent problem of radical right-wing violence, racist attacks in Germany and the plight of refugees. But in fact the two issues are more closely linked than many people here would like to believe. We need to talk about globalization and its various aspects. Above all we need to learn to look beyond national borders and start to act on a European and international level – on the issue of refugees as well as on the global economic crisis.

Economic globalization led to de-industrialization in North Atlantic states, as described in Sven Beckert's book *King Cotton*. This can be seen most clearly in the cotton and textile industry, where the worker movement waged a historic battle to secure better working conditions. Wage costs rose as a result, which meant that this step forward ultimately worked against them. Workers in the textile industry in South Asia are subjected to a whole range of problems, including safety issues in the factories. Fatal catastrophes like the fire at Ali Enterprises in September 2012 in Karachi (Pakistan) or the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in April 2013 in Dhaka (Bangladesh) have seen hundreds of workers pay the ultimate price for the manufacture of clothes for European firms.

Two of those involved from Pakistan and Bangladesh spoke last week at different forums in Berlin: Mahmudul Hasan Sumon is a member of an activist anthropologist group and describes how after a factory fire he and his fellow campaigners worked to compile a list of all the workers buried under the rubble, a task that the state should have carried out but never did. Ali Karamat, a trade union activist from Karachi, spoke of the “disappearance” of the state and traces this back to a restructuring program by the IMF in the 1980s. As a condition for lending to Pakistan, the IMF demanded massive state austerity measures and the deregulation of the labor market, in part by restricting labor safety laws. Austerity and deregulation contributed to the fatal catastrophes in recent years. Both speakers stress that these were not natural disasters; they were man-made. They are both calling for a restoration of state structures in their countries, by which of course they mean democratic structures and not the authoritarian military regimes of days gone by.

It gets particularly interesting when Sumon and Karamat address the Western NGOs that are active in their countries. Both speakers are so polite as to avoid directly criticizing this (i.e. our) involvement. But they oppose the notion of the “NGO-ization of the world” and stress that certain areas like securing workplace safety or establishing legal liability are the responsibilities of the state. From their perspective what are most needed are strong unions which can undertake long-term work to secure safe working conditions as opposed to the ad-hoc responses that follow factory fires and other disasters.

It's a very topical debate, as shown by the lawsuit submitted to the Regional Court of Dortmund against German clothing discounter KiK by four victims of the Ali Enterprises fire, a case which is being supported by ECCHR along with medico international. In its response submitted to the Court this week, KiK vehemently rejected the compensation claims. The company once again stressed that the Code of Conduct it provided to the producers was exclusively “ethically motivated” and was not legally binding. Consequence-free morals – an approach widely propagated by the KiKs of this world. With its response the German retailer has shown, albeit involuntarily, why German civil society along with the trade unions and

victims in Bangladesh and Pakistan are justified in calling for binding laws and state intervention.