

# Outsourcing jobs exploit, union leaders say

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BOSTON - Contrary to what is widely reported, jobs that are created in India as a result of outsourcing are highly exploitative for Indian workers in these centers, said a delegation of trade union activists from India.

The delegation is touring the United States in December in an effort to highlight this exploitation and push for fair labor standards. It visited New York, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland and Seattle, and plans to visit Portland, Ore., Washington D.C. and Atlanta.

The Indian union leaders are affiliated with the New Trade Union Initiative, a confederation of independent worker unions in India. The organization has teamed up with Jobs with Justice, a network of over 40 workers' rights coalitions in the United States that connects labor, community, and student organizations to work for social and economic justice.

"Jobs are going to India not because of the wage difference but because these jobs are unregulated," said Ashim Roy, a delegate with the New Trade Union Initiative. "There are no laws in India about minimum wage or the maximum numbers of hours workers can work. And multinational companies are taking advantage of that."

Roy represents workers employed in the General Electric Co.'s plants in India. He is also a member of the Citizen's Initiative in Gujarat, a human rights movement. He is a long time activist in India's socialist movements and is originally from the North Eastern state of West Bengal.

Roy said that compared to American workers in services such as call centers, Indians are working in a much more stressful environment.

"People are working 16-hour days and often nights, at five times the intensity of the American workers who do the same job here," said Roy. "We are really stressed out."

Roy pointed out that a call center agent in the United States typically serves one customer every five minutes. In India, the workers are required to attend to a call every minute and, if they don't, their wages can be withheld.

"Jobs are not getting shifted to India," Roy said. "For every two jobs going to India, only one is being created."

"We want to create an awareness and work with workers in the United States to prevent exploitation of Indian workers and guarantee jobs with fair wages and human dignity for all," he added.

According to him, labor conditions in the manufacturing industry are far worse.

"Twenty five percent of the foreign investment in India comes from the United States," said Roy. "What multinationals are doing is that they are not setting up plants, but many times only taking over already existing plants and laying off workers there."

He said that General Electric laid off 6,000 workers after it took over an existing bulb manufacturing facility in Gujarat a few years ago.

In the coal industry, privatization has created more hazardous conditions for work and increased discrimination for women, said V. Chandra, secretary of a union representing 50,000 coal miners in India.

"Privatization has led to more lay offs and retrenchment and more women have been pushed into contract labor, which lacks safety and employment security," said Chandra.

According to her, women are being replaced by men in highly mechanized mines, and women are forced to take up jobs in unsafe mining sites.

"Several hundred women are engaged in a variety of jobs related to the mines - retrieving gold, pieces of metal, or coal from mill sites and cyanide heaps," she said.

"Also when men die working in these mines or are too ill to work, their widows and wives are given replacement of the jobs, usually in order to pay up for the debts taken by the men," she said. "These women are aware that their lives and health are in danger, but have no choice but to continue working in these mines."

Anannya Bhattacharjee, an immigrants and workers rights activist in the United States is working with the Indian labor leaders to reach out to their American counterparts.

"This tour marks the first step towards building a dialogue about ensuring the interests of working people in the United States and India," Bhattacharjee said.

"We need to get to know each other, especially during a time when outsourcing has really hit the media and is changing the economics of the world and India."