

MORE than 80 percent of labourers employed in the cashew industry are women. Women work mainly in the departments of shelling, grading and peeling. Men workers roast the kernels, extract and store the oil, put the finished product in the oven and then into cold storage. The factory we visited in Mangalore had 475 women and 25 men. This factory has a system whereby all the 475 women work in every department by rotation.

The Shelling Department

As you enter the shelling department, you see women sitting in rows, with heaps of roasted black kernels covered with a white ash in front of them. The women break the shell and try to take out the whole nut. A few women were able to do this successfully, but a large number of women could not bring the fruit whole, so pieces of broken cashews were to be seen in baskets.

“How much do you get for one kilo?” I enquired. “The rate is only 65 paise for one kilo if we can get the cashew out without breaking it.” “How much do you earn this way?” One woman showed me two baskets in which broken pieces were stored. Wages are given only for those nuts which are not broken. The job seems difficult for most of the women. Many of them lose their wages for the day. The piece-rated workers get 65 paise per kilo for whole nuts, and Rs 2 as dearness allowance. The daily rated workers get Rs 8.86 per day including dearness allowance.

From conversation and from observation of the nature of work in this department, it appears that women would not be able to earn even Rs 4 to 5 daily for work which begins at 8 am, and ends at 5 pm. The women feel they should be paid for the work of extracting broken cashews, if not at full, at least at half rates, that is 33 paise per kilo, which is what women in the peeling department get. The management not only sells the broken cashews in the market but even the smallest granules are sieved into different varieties and sold to biscuit factories and bakeries, bringing in considerable profits to the cashew factory owners. Why then should the

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Women in the Cashew Industry

—Among the Lowest Paid Workers in Kerala

women in the shelling department be deprived of a small wage? Discontent is clearly visible among them.

Peeling And Grading

In the peeling and grading department, work is somewhat easier and rates are Rs 7.20 per kilo, including dearness allowance. Here, women are paid for peeling and grading broken cashews as well as whole ones. The cashews are divided into 10 grades. The big fruit nut has a value of Rs 90 a kilo at cost price. It is sold at much higher prices when exported to the Soviet Union, USA and other countries. Of course, we Indians

cannot afford to purchase this product. It is a luxury even for the rich people here.

Facilities Won

Last year, the women workers received a 13 per cent bonus and the same quantum is expected this year. The women get maternity leave for three months and benefits are paid according to their daily rate. A few beds are reserved for them in the ESI hospital at Mangalore. However, the prescribed medicines are never available in the dispensary so they end up having to spend money from their own pocket.

Tea, coffee and snacks in the canteen



are subsidized and available to workers for only 7 paise. This does help the workers to make up for some of the loss in wages, especially in the shelling department.

The union is adamant on continuing the 7 paise rate as against the insistence of the management on increasing it to 14 paise. There is a creche for the children, which is quite good as compared to those we have seen in other industries. The children have cradles, clothes, toys and milk, and an ayah is employed to look after them. Gyanamma proudly told us that this creche has come into existence because of their persistence.

Health Hazards

The manager of the factory categorically stated that the health hazard created by the injurious oil while the kernels are roasted in the ovens, had been eliminated. This oil is very bad for the fingers, that is why dry ash is thrown on the roasted kernels. In spite of this, the women do sustain injuries. The fingers should have no contact with the oil, but contact does take place.

In another factory which is operated by the same management, the 550 women workers are each provided with a small shell-breaking machine. The output of work there is greater than that in the factory we visited. When we asked why the mechanized process where-by the shell is easily broken and the nut comes out whole, is not used in this factory as well, the union secretary explained that greater injury is inflicted on the fingers by this machine.

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MOST of the cashew factories in Kerala are privately owned, but the state government also runs several factories. In the sixties, private owners began to evade labour laws, by closing down factories and shifting production to cottage industries. This system known as Kudivarappu has created an unorganized sector, in which the workers are paid on a piece-rate basis. Women in this sector are deprived of all the rights won by years of trade union struggle, such as a statutory minimum wage, paid leave and maternity benefits.

A study of daily earnings of workers in 18 industries in Kerala in 1961 showed that the lowest earnings were in the cashew industry—as low as Rs 1.40 a day. At present, women in this industry are among the lowest paid workers on the industrial line. The wage in the Kudivarappu is totally arbitrary. Anything between 32 and 76 paise per kilo is paid for shelling. Most women in this sector do not even know what the minimum wage should be. Unable to make both ends meet with what they earn from cashew work, they are all heavily in debt to

shopkeepers, money lenders, relatives or neighbours.

The diet of these workers does not contain the minimum calorific requirements. Rice and tapioca are the principal food items. A recent study shows that as a result of this constant undernourishment, most of the women and children are stunted and underdeveloped. Even though the general literacy level among women in Kerala is the highest in the country, most of the cashew worker families are compelled to discontinue girls' education after the primary stage.

"We refused to let the machine be installed here inspite of, ths manager appealing to the women that they could earn much more by using the machine."

When the minimum wage committee of Karnataka visited the machine using factory three months pgo, the CITU general secretary who represented the union on the committee, asked the women workers the following questions in the presence of the committee members:

"Are you able to comb your hair yourself?"

"No."

"Can you grind the spices at home?"

"No."

"Can you wash your clothes ?"

"No."

"Why is this, ?"

"After, working in this department for a month, our fingers start burning because of the extra oil coming out when we break the shell on the machine. Boils and abscesses appear on our hands. This oil is very harmful. Some sort of protective oil is given to us to use while breaking the shell, but it is not possible to use it while handling every shell—it takes too much

time doesn't serve any purpose."

The fingers of these women look as though they have been afflicted with leprosy. It was natural therefore, that the union thought twice before accepting the offer of the manager to install machines in their factory as well.No doubt the work becomes easier and the output is three times greater.But the union refused the offer beacuse of the health hazard involved.I enquired whether protective gloves woul not lessen the danger .This has not yet been tried .It is doubtful whether the management would be ready to spend so much money on gloves, that too for unskilled women workers.

The Workers' Demands

The main demand of the workers is an increase of Rs 2 in daily wages and payment of dearness allowance according to the consumer price index.They also want 33 paisa per kilo to be paid to workers in the shelling department for extraction of broken cashews.There is an urgent need for transport facilities.For instance,one woman worker,Mariamamma, who has four children,cannot afford the bus fare of Rs 1.90 daily,so she has to walk about 13

kilometres from her village every morning so as to reach the factory at 7 am.

Earners Of Foreign Exchange

Though the management told us that the industry is facing a crisis due to the non-availability of kernels from other countries, the figures showing how much profit the company makes, and how much foreign exchange the government gets from cashew export tell a different story. In 1980-81 the amount of foreign exchange earned was Rs 123.2 crores for the export of 28 million kilos of cashew nut. One kilo of cashew costs Rs 70 in India.

Union Leadership

The Cashewnut And Allied Workers Union, affiliated to the CITU, has a strong base here, with a membership of 771 workers from cashew, arecanut and other industries. There is an executive committee of 20, of whom 18 are women and 2 are men. Except for the president and general secretary, whose work requires some knowledge of English, the office bearers are all women. The working committee consists of four women, all very proud of being CITU leaders.

(The Voice of The Working Woman)

Of Human Rights

*They said that
You were working for Africa's
freedom.*

*They said
I was lucky to be the fiancee
of a man so noble*

Oh! The protector of human rights!

*Only yesterday, I was weaving my
dreams, fantasizing
about you, tall and dignified—
too dignified for mango leaves and
rangoli and me—
a bundle of red*

*Until you shattered the engagement
and my dreams
of mango leaves and rangoli*

*by telling Appa:
"She is too dark."*

The Appropriate Word

Roget's Thesaurus, the reference book of synonyms and antonyms, used for over 130 years by writers to find the perfect word, has been overhauled by its latest editor Susan Lloyd, to exclude male chauvinist terms. Lloyd, whose editing project was three years long, explains that the sexist words have been dropped to make the language less misleading. For instance, the word "mankind" has been replaced by "humankind", the word "countryman" by "country dweller" and for "rich man", Roget's suggests "rich person." Lloyd says that research has shown that if you use the word "caveman" today, people think of men only, not of men, women and children.

— Sent by Anima Bose

Rejesh: You men you live all alone?
Meena: No, Mita and I stay together.
Rajesh: Oh, so both of you are living alone?

A Victory

The women's liberation movement in Algeria has forced the government to withdraw the proposed "family code" which would have legalized polygamy and treated women and minors under the law. Women held mass demonstrations, demanded public debate and presented a 10,000 signature petition to the assembly. Women who had been active in the struggle for Algerian independence demanded to know how a "socialist" government could propose such a blow to women's rights.