

Sri Lanka: FTZ unions slam employer negligence, authorities' inaction

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The Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union (FTZGSEU) has alleged that the negligence of the employers and the inaction of the Department of Labour has led to the large number of workers in the apparel sector contracting the Covid-19 virus during the current third wave.

“After the Unichela factory in Panadura – owned by the MAS group – with around 1,500 workers, and their Thulhiriya export complex with over 8,000 workers, reported large numbers of workers testing positive for the virus, the Labour Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva had reportedly instructed the Labour Department to investigate the spread of the virus in Thulhiriya. A similar investigation was ordered after the Brandix factory in Minuwangoda reported mass infections in October last year. But the outcome of that investigation is yet unknown,” the Union said in a statement released to the media on 23 May.

MAS Holdings said yesterday (24) that 380 employees at one of its facilities in Thulhiriya have tested positive for the virus.

Labour Minister de Silva had, on 20 May, instructed the Commissioner General of Labour Prabath Chandrakeerthi to immediately hold an investigation as to how a large number of employees at the MAS factory in Thulhiriya were infected with Covid-19.

Chandrakeerthi told *The Morning* yesterday that following the investigation in Thulhiriya, no negligence had been found on the part of the employer.

The FTZGSEU further claimed that over 800 Covid-19 cases have been reported from the Koggala FTZ in the factories of Unichela, Brandix, Esquel, Star One, and Star Two. The Koggala FTZ has also recently reported the death of an engineer at the Star Garments factory due to the virus. The Union said that more serious cases in the zone are temporarily housed at a makeshift hospital in Habaraduwa, leased out by the MAS Group.

Meanwhile, the Union said that 100 positive cases have been found last week in the Next factory in the Katunayake FTZ, although 260 workers there have been vaccinated on a priority basis.

Furthermore, the Union alleges that a factory in the Northern Province has been compelling pregnant workers to report to work despite a Government circular requesting pregnant women to stay at home due to the rapid spread of the virus. Only pregnant women who are past seven months in their pregnancy are supposedly allowed to stay at home.

Speaking to *The Morning*, Women's Centre – Ja-Ela Executive Director Padmini Weerasuriya, who works closely with FTZ workers from Koggala and Katunayake, said that factories continue to function, despite reporting high numbers of Covid-19 cases, as their priority is to meet the shipping orders.

Weerasuriya questioned as to who would take the responsibility if a large-scale loss of life occurs within the FTZs.

“We are requesting that polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests be done on all workers and that all workers be vaccinated,” said Weerasuriya.

Weerasuriya further said that although some workers are open to the idea of a one month lockdown, other workers are worried about the loss of salary during a lockdown.

Commenting on the slow vaccination drive inside the FTZs, Weerasuriya alleged that approximately 2,000 workers of the nearly 48,000 in the Katunayake FTZ have been vaccinated, and that among those vaccinated were upper level management whilst the number of factory workers who got vaccinated is much less.

Earlier this month, Weerasuriya told us that some factories in the Zones have forced workers to find private bathroom facilities in their private living environments, an option which is not economically viable to these workers who share boarding facilities with each other.

The Board of Investments (BOI) told *The Morning* on 16 May that 2,000 workers in the Katunayake FTZ, 2,200 workers in the Biyagama FTZ, and 2,000 workers in the Mirigama FTZ have so far been vaccinated. The BOI has also requested and is expecting priority for FTZ workers in the Government’s vaccination drive in the immediate coming months. Ministry of Health officials told *The Morning* on 23 May that FTZ workers would most likely be prioritised for the vaccination drive next month.

In October 2020, a Covid-19 cluster was identified in the Katunayake FTZ, causing many workers’ rights groups to raise concerns about how the spread of the pandemic in the FTZ could put over 50,000 workers at risk, and noting also the crowded living conditions of workers’ hostels and their need to report to work in multiple factories.

Pamodi Waravita

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