

Leather workers in the Govindpuri-Tughlakabad Extension working on piece-rates for leather garment exporters organised themselves as the Delhi Leather Karigar Sangathan (DLKS) in 1999. When the piece-rates fell by 30% between 2000 and 2003, the DLKS mobilised the workers to demand a restoration of the old rates. In July 2003, negotiations with exporters resulted in an agreement to increase the reduced piece-rates by 10%. However, the three largest exporters refused to implement the agreement. The resulting standoff was addressed not by the labour department but the Assistant Commissioner of Police (Kalkaji). He first forcibly dispersed a public meeting of the DLKS on 19 July 2003, chaired negotiations with the exporters, threatened office-bearers of the union with dire consequences, assured exporters police support to run their units as they pleased, and deployed police at the factory gates to ensure this.

PUDR was approached by DLKS when they were denied permission by the local police authorities to hold a meeting at the District Park near Okhla roundabout on 5 August 2003 to discuss the latest turn of events in their struggle on the piece-rate issue. PUDR had written to the local police on the right of the workers to hold the meeting to discuss their immediate problems and take decisions democratically. However, on the morning of 5 August 2003 the police informed DLKS that permission to hold the meeting, at the specified place, had been denied. Before the meeting could be arranged at an alternative venue the police detained nine office bearers of DLKS including President and General Secretary from the union office. Those detained were released in the evening after more than 700 workers protested at the Govindpuri Police Station. This event exemplifies the growing tendency of the state to view union activity as a law and order problem and, therefore, to deal with it not through the labour administration but by the law and order machinery.

The leather sector in India is amongst the top eight export earners for the country with an annual production value of US \$ 4 billion and an annual export value of US \$ 2 billion. The Council for Leather Exports, which serves as a bridge between Indian leather exporters and international buyers, claims that it is “committed to promoting the growth of the Indian leather industry in the global markets, through modern, transparent and best industry practices” and promises “top priority to occupational safety and work conditions”. The reality of the leather garment workers in Delhi provides a glaringly different picture – growing job insecurity, very low wages, absence of service records, denial of bonuses or provident funds, no labour inspections, unhealthy and unsafe conditions at the workplace and increasing attempts by the exporters to thwart workers’ demands by bringing in the police to play the role of an arbiter.

It was in this context that PUDR felt the need to conduct an investigation into the working conditions and struggles of leather garment workers in Delhi. The fact-finding team conducted a detailed survey on the working conditions in nine leather garment units, visited workers at their houses in Sangam Vihar colony, and spoke to both the office-bearers of the DLKS as well as leather garment exporters.

This report tries to look at the structure and operation of the leather garment industry that is forcibly keeping most of the labour force at sub-minimum levels of subsistence as well as the role of the state machinery (particularly the labour department and the police) in reinforcing this. It also chronicles the struggles of the leather garment workers – the issues taken up by the union, the gains made by it and the tremendous odds it is facing. Our findings highlight not merely the blatant and systematic denial of the most basic democratic rights of workers but also the brutal repression unleashed by state agencies when workers try to organise and collectively struggle for their rights. The following is the report of the team.

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I. Brands, Exporters, Fabricators & Workers

India's share in the US \$65 billion world trade in leather and leather products is about 2.4%. The major products made out of leather are footwear, leather garments, leather goods (e.g. handbags, wallets, belts, gloves, sports goods), harness and saddlery, etc. Leather garments account for one-fourth of the total exports of leather and leather products from India. Most of India's leather garment exports land up in the markets of Germany, USA, Italy, UK, Spain and France. The total leather garment export from India had grown at 9% annually between 1995-96 and 2000-01 to reach Rs.21,036 million. In the following years, however, India's exports fell to Rs.18,064 million in 2001-02 and Rs.12,691 in 2002-03. It rose slightly, by about 6 per cent, in 2003-04.

The leather sector, particularly the export of leather garments, is a source of high value addition within the country and is seen as having immense potential for future growth. The leather garment is a high labour intensive commodity and its value addition is four times over the raw material. Hence, the manufacture and export of leather products is systematically promoted. The government, in a bid to increase foreign exchange earnings, had encouraged export-oriented units by giving them tax benefits more than a decade ago.

Intense international and local competition in the leather garment industry in the industrialised countries has resulted in manufacturers in these countries outsourcing production to third world countries where wage levels are lower and labour laws more lax. In fact, in most of the latter countries existing labour laws are not implemented and alterations are being made to laws to suit export-oriented production and to the detriment of workers' rights.

Pushing production to low wage areas is part of the relentless attempt to lower production costs and increase profits. Additionally there is an attempt on the part of large companies to reduce their direct involvement in manufacturing.

Production involves the running of factories that demand both investment costs in machinery and its upkeep as well as wage and supervision costs and also carries the burden of uncertainties. Subcontracting of manufacturing, in contrast, implies zero capital outlays and only a minor loss in profits. This is so because the large companies focus on branding of a product, expending their massive resources on sponsorships, packaging, advertising, marketing and building the 'image' of the brand. These ensure a much higher brand price and a profit rate much above the normal. Hence large companies are decreasing their workforce or even completely bypassing production by outsourcing it either to lower wage economies or lower wage regions within a country. The result has been a dramatic increase in subcontracting thus increasing the flexibility of the parent firm to switch manufacturers with ease. This is also the case in the leather garment industry.

Indian leather garment exporters are suppliers in the global supply chain of leather garments, catering to the specifications of international brands and big retail chains like GAP, M&S, Wal-Mart, Armani, Calvin Klein, etc. The Indian exporters get their orders from international buyers who serve as intermediaries between the retailer/brand name and the exporters. They may be buying houses owned by the retailer/brand name or independent buying offices, independent agents or traders serving different clients. Their main tasks are communicating between the retailer and exporter, finding new exporters who can produce what the retailer wants and ensuring quality control. The buyer provides the design specifications of a particular garment along with a price-quote to the exporter. In most cases, the buyer gives even the raw material and the accessory specifications. The exporter sends a sample garment back to the buyer and negotiates on the price. An order is placed only after the retailer/brand name's design and sourcing team approve of the cost, time, quality and quantity offered by the exporter.

The leather garment exporters in turn outsource production to fabricating units. The fabricating units are thus sub-suppliers that provide the supplier (exporter) with finished garments. In Delhi, more than 95% of the leather garments are produced in fabricating units. The annual turnover of an exporter in Delhi's leather garment export units ranges between Rs. 0.7 million – Rs. 2,500 million. The huge turnover in the case of some firms gives a false impression about their size since most of the export units have only skeletal in-house facilities, preferring subcontracting instead. Some big exporters do have in-house production facilities installed with latest machines, but this is merely a facade to satisfy the buyer who places an order only after ascertaining the production facilities and on being assured of quality products. The team met 11 leather garment exporters who have been operating for the last one to two decades and make a turnover of Rs. 50-150 million each. These exporters had between 50-300 machines in their own units but none of them engage in 100% in-house production. Three exporters give 75% of the order to fabricators, two give 25-50%, one exporter outsources 51-75% and five exporters rely completely on the fabricating units.

Most of these fabricating units are set up by exporters. In such cases the exporter is the principal employer –sends wages to be paid to the workers, owns the machines, pays the rent of the unit, employs a supervisor to oversee production and ensure quality control, and pays the fabricator a fixed salary. The big exporters set up more than one unit in order to avoid the concentration of workers at a particular unit, reducing possibilities of worker organisations and thus weakening their bargaining power. Moreover, this allows exporters to wind up production when facing difficult times, and also shift manufacturing from one area to another. In any case it absolves exporters from the responsibility of maintaining proper conditions of work. Often the workers are unaware of these arrangements – they deal directly only with the fabricators. Apart from the fabricating units owned by exporters there are independent units that get contracts from particular exporters and

yet smaller fabricators who go to different exporters in search of orders. On an average, an exporter with a turnover of more than Rs. 50 million deals with more than 15 fabricators.

Workers are employed in the fabricating units predominantly on casual or contract basis. The remuneration to the worker is negotiated on a piece-rate basis when a fabricator gets an order from the exporter. This is unlike the exporter's in-house production where workers are employed on a permanent basis with regular wages. The piece-rate is fixed on the basis of the type of garment, its design and the operations involved in its making. The exporters fix the piece-rate in fabricating units owned by them. In independent fabricating units, exporters negotiate the piece-rate with fabricators. Since the exporter deals with a number of fabricators, the negotiating power rests with the exporter and they are therefore able to suppress the piece-rates.

Table 1: Piece rates for different garments and average earning of workers in leather garment industry.

Garment	Piece rate (Rs.)	Avg	No of gmt/day	Avg Earning/working day	Avg earning/month*
1/4 Skirt	50-55	52.50	4.50	236.25	2,362.50
1/2 skirts	65-85	75.00	3.50	262.50	2,625.00
Full skirt	90-125	107.50	2.50	268.75	2,687.50
Jacket	115-135	125.00	2.50	312.50	3,125.00
Waist coat	55-75	65.00	4.00	260.00	2,600.00
Long Coat	240-260	250.00	1.00	250.00	2,500.00
Trouser	90-125	107.50	2.00	215.00	2,150.00
Shirt	90-120	105.00	2.00	210.00	2,100.00
Average				251.88	2,518.75

Note: Average earning per month has been calculated on the assumption that a worker gets work only for 10 days in a month.

The table above shows the piece rates for various garments in the Delhi leather garment industry and average monthly earnings of workers. These rates were procured from various workers interviewed by the team during the course of survey and are based on the average of 10 days per month for which the workers are able to obtain employment.

Therefore, a worker in the leather garment industry, who is considered a skilled worker, earns on an average Rs. 2,500 per month or Rs. 84 per day, which is less than the basic minimum wage of an unskilled worker in Delhi which stands at Rs. 107.40 at present.

The very logic and structure of the supply chain in the leather garment industry is such that insecurity is passed on to those lowest down in the chain, i.e. the workers who have the least ability to resist pressures from above. While it is the fabricator who pays the workers, he has little or no control over the piece-rates. The exporters are able to take large orders from international

buyers and make huge profits precisely because they can outsource production to several fabricating units. It is this very structure that enables them to escape all responsibility towards workers. Moreover, by suppressing the piece-rate levels they are able to further expand their profits. This strategy of accumulating wealth by forcibly keeping most of the labour force at rock-bottom levels of subsistence cannot be democratic – only an extremely authoritarian exercise of power can enforce such extreme disparities in wealth. This is why any resistance by workers is met with repression both by exporters as well as the state machinery.

II. Leather Workers: Living and Working

There are unofficially 1.25 lakh workers in leather garment industry in Delhi, NOIDA, Gurgaon and Faridabad. Leather garment stitching is extremely skilled work, requiring tremendous concentration and expertise. Since leather once stitched cannot be undone, only a highly skilled tailor is suitable for the job. In fact, the workers engaged in the industry consider their skill to be higher than skilled workers and term themselves as ‘super-skilled’ workers. Workers in this field feel a deep sense of pride in their skill and their self-esteem is also closely tied up to their work. Along with the more tangible losses that their own deteriorating living and working standards have brought, this intangible but important aspect has also suffered severely.

The Workers and the Work Process

Scattered across the city and its suburbs, Noida, Patparganj, Govindpuri, Khanpur, Tuglakabad, Lado Sarai, Janakpuri or Naraina, these workers work in small leather garment fabricating units. The fabricator normally appoints a supervisor, sometimes a close relative, who gets a salary, and arranges to get the cut pieces from the exporter and actually oversees the work in the unit. The prepared, coloured, designed and cut pieces of leather meant for different kinds of leather garments of the latest

fashion and style are sent by the exporter to the fabricator who agrees to deliver the pieces at the earliest and at the lowest piece rate. The workers in the fabricating unit stitch these pieces as per the instructions of the ‘master’ tailor, especially when the workers are required to put together a garment of a new or unfamiliar design. The ‘master’ gets a monthly salary from the fabricator. An average fabricating unit would have between 20 and 30 workers – while most stitch the leather pieces, a few (two to four) work as ‘pasters’ who paste and attach certain parts of garments before they are stitched. Labels, often of internationally known companies are given to the workers to be attached to the garments. The finished garments are delivered by the supervisor/fabricator back to the exporter, who in turn sends consignments to the foreign buyer.

The Workplaces and Working Conditions

A typical fabricating unit is essentially one dingy room in a rented building, with 20 to 30 treadle sewing machines in it and an equal number of workers running them. The machines are archaic, placed in rows and allowing less than a foot’s gap between two rows. Every worker runs one machine that is fitted with a small motor. The motors are attached to electrical points by long, tangled wires. Workers periodically have to use

Economy of Piece rate

The piece rate system is not a unique feature in the Indian leather garment industry, but also found in most other developing and underdeveloped countries. Adoption of this system is beneficial to exporters at the expense of workers. When a buyer negotiates with an exporter on the price of producing a particular kind of garment, the negotiated FOB (freight on board) price includes the cost incurred for raw material, accessories, labour (including salaries of permanent staff employed and piece rate to workers), cost of infrastructure and capital employed by the exporter and exporters own profit margin. These costs are different for each type of garment. The cost of leather is the major component followed by labour, infrastructure capital and accessories in the production of a garment. The following table shows average percentage for the various components in the production of various types of garment. These figures have been calculated on the basis of interviews with exporters.

Table: The cost components of various garments

Garment	FOB Price (Rs)	Average	Retail Prices: Intl mkt (US\$)	Retail Prices: Intl mkt (Rs)	Raw material (40%)	Labour Component (30%)	Accessories (5%)	Infra & Capital (10%)	Profit (15%)
1/4 Skirt	800-1000	900	100	4,500	360.00	270	45	90	135
1/2 skirts	1500-1800	1,250	135	6,075	500.00	375	62.5	125	187
Full skirt	2300-2500	2,400	250	11,250	960.00	720	120	240	360
Jacket	5000-6000	5,500	550	24,750	2,200.00	1650	275	550	825
Waist coat	900-1200	1,050	115	5,175	420.00	315	52.5	105	157
Long Coat	6000-6500	6,250	700	31,500	2,500.00	1875	312.5	625	937
Trouser	4500-5200	4,850	535	24,075	1,940.00	1455	242.5	485	727.5
Shirt	4000-4500	4,250	450	20,250	1,700.00	1275	212.5	425	637.5

The exporter squeezes extra profits by paying workers much less than that is required under the contract with the buyer. Let us take the example of full skirts, as highlighted in the two tables above. The price negotiated nowadays is roughly Rs 2,400. The labour component for a full skirt is estimated to be Rs 720, of which half is allocated to permanent workers, and the balance (Rs 360) to the piece-rate worker. However, the leather garment worker finally is given a rate of roughly Rs 90–Rs 125, or about Rs 107 a piece. Which means a crude and additional extraction of over Rs 250 per piece simply by paying them less than they are supposed to.

Now, an average worker produces 2.5 pieces of full skirts per day. Assuming a worker were to get 25 days work a month, which is what they should get, their earnings would be Rs 900 a day or Rs 22,500 a month which is as per the labour component negotiated between the exporter and the buyer. Instead the worker wage component, thanks to the piece-rate system, is merely Rs 6,719 a month. (The actual earnings for each worker is even lower since each gets only about ten days' employment a month). The additional surplus squeezed out by the exporter is a staggering Rs 15,781 a month. (See table below)

Table: Economy of piece rate

Garment	Labour Component (30%)	No of gm / worker/ day	monthly production	Monthly bill for Labour Component	Monthly bill/ worker	% share of worker (monthly)	Salary (perm. employee)	Appropriated by exporter	% share of appropriation
1/4 Skirt	270.00	4.5	112.5	30,375	5,906	19.4%	15,187.50	9,281.25	30.6%
1/2 skirts	375.00	3.5	87.5	32,813	6,563	20.0%	16,406.25	9,843.75	30.0%
Full skirt	720.00	2.5	62.5	45,000	6,719	14.9%	22,500.00	15,781.25	35.1%
Jacket	1,650.00	2.5	62.5	103,125	7,813	7.6%	51,562.50	43,750.00	42.4%
Waist coat	315.00	4.0	100.0	31,500	6,500	20.6%	15,750.00	9,250.00	29.4%
Long Coat	1,875.00	1.0	25.0	46,875	6,250	13.3%	23,437.50	17,187.50	36.7%
Trouser	1,455.00	2.0	50.0	72,750	5,375	7.4%	36,375.00	31,000.00	42.6%
Shirt	1,275.00	2.0	50.0	63,750	5,250	8.2%	31,875.00	26,625.00	41.8%
Average	991.88	2.75	68.75	53,273.44	6,296.88	11.8%	26,636.72	20,339.84	38.2%

an inflammable chemical solution to stick parts of the garments while they stitch. This is kept in small jars on the ply board surfaces of the sewing machines, dangerously close to the motors. The floor and every surface is littered with pieces of leather, snipped and cut while making the garments. Safety standards in the fabricating units are extremely poor. The most common kind of accident that takes place in these units is fire – from the sparks of the machine motor coming into contact with the inflammable solution lying next to it on the machine tables. Fires of this nature break out routinely every few months in almost every fabricating unit. Faizul Haq, a worker at Khurana Leathers, got his face, hands and feet burnt in a similar fire in the Govindpuri unit some time ago. Workers managed to put out the fire as they do in most instances. He was taken to the government hospital by his employers and given Rs.100 for treatment. He was unable to work for the next six months because of his injuries. He had to go back to his village and spent Rs.3,000-4,000 on medical treatment. Despite incidents like this, no safety mechanisms exist in the fabricating units. Not one of the fabricating units surveyed had fire extinguishers that worked.

In most units a couple of tubelights and a window provide the light and air in the room, and some units have fans. Some units are located in basements with a single ventilator as the only source of light and air, making the space claustrophobic. The toilet is a small dirty space not larger than a cupboard, often shared by the several leather and cotton garment-making units located in the same building. Drinking water comes from a water tank, which is rarely cleaned and often has dead insects floating in it. The overwhelming impression one gets upon entering any of these units is the noise – a loud collective whirring of the machines, which makes any kind of conversation impossible.

Prolonged exposure to the sound of machines has meant that at least a few workers in every unit suffer from partial deafness after a few years. Concentrating on the stitching has also led to a partial impairment of the eyesight of some. Workers admit that cases of TB are common and work related as they often have to make padded

leather garments whose synthetic stuffing continuously irritates their nose and wind pipe. However, few concretely admitted to any physical problems whatsoever. The reason appears simple. Public admission of ill health could be seen as an admission of the inability to work, and as the workers themselves acknowledged that is the primary reason why they would not openly admit to ill health of any kind. Moreover, they cannot afford to go to the doctor for checkups in the absence of ESI benefits. Beyond a certain age, worn out and burnt out by the unrelenting nature of their work, they simply have to stop or are thrown out. Thus by the time they are in their late 40s workers often have to leave, unable to bear the pressure of work.

Yet the running of the machines is, for workers, a happy and welcome sound, no matter that at the end of the day all the workers lose their hearing somewhat, and their eyesight begins to weaken in a few years. For all workers feel that work appears to be dwindling. There are days and weeks when the machines lie silent, when workers go to their fabricating unit, wait there till mid day in desperate hope that the fabricator would get an order, so that they could work and get paid. At H.S. Fashions in Khanpur, for instance, the workers had got work only two days before our visit, and for ten days before that the workers had had no work at all. Fabricators too claim that they have not been able to get orders through the month and that over the last half a decade work appears to be dwindling. To the workers this translates into getting trapped in a continuous cycle of debt. They are unable to find other work, for if they do not reach the fabricating unit some day, the fabricator or the supervisor simply replaces them, in case he gets an order. The pressures of hunger and basic necessities has led to grossly unjust situations where, for instance, workers in H.S Fashions did not even know how much they were going to get paid for the pieces that they were making, as this was the condition set by the exporter. In this case, the fabricator had got the order upon the condition that the workers would meet the deadline and complete the order but not ask about the rates that they were going to get. Ten days of no work,

and weeks of little work before that, had forced the workers to accept such terms set by the exporters.

Piece-rate Wages, No Benefits

Workers get paid once every fortnight on a piece-rate basis. Payment also varies according to the piece that is being made. While for stitching a long coat a worker gets Rs. 240-260, for a skirt he gets Rs. 50-85 on an average. There is enormous variation in piece rates across fabricating units, depending among other things on the bargaining position of the workers. So, for instance, workers take up to 12 hours to complete a full jacket, for which they get Rs. 110 as was the case in the Al Faizan fabricating unit in Tuglakabad. Workers in Sangeeta Fashions in Govindpuri were to get Rs. 160 and Rs. 135 for two different styles of long coats that they were making. They had been working at this order and on these styles for about a week after being without any work for about 15 days. While initially they would not be able to finish a coat in a day, after a week they were able to complete one to one-and-a-half pieces daily. Some weeks ago, when they had work, the workers in the same unit had been ordered to stitch a mini skirt for which they got Rs. 70 per piece, but were able to complete only one piece a day initially. So the variability stems not only from the availability or lack of work/orders but also from the difference in the kinds and rates of pieces they get. This is apart from the variability due to the individual skill of some workers who are able to work faster and finish more pieces. As mentioned earlier, fabricators generally pay the workers in these units once in every 15 days. It is the workers who pay the pasters. They give them 10% of the amount they earn from each piece. The fabricator does not pay the pasters independently. An order is distributed by the workers themselves in a manner so that each worker gets at least one piece. Those who finish first start working on the next piece. In case the order is less than the number of workers, they work in groups.

According to workers in a few units, the orders from exporters appeared to be far less in the months of December and January. In the lives of workers this means days and weeks of no work

and a fortnightly pay packet, which could have simply nothing at all, further increasing their desperation. By and large, however, the distinction between lean and peak seasons in this work had almost disappeared with the shrinkage of work over the last five to six years. The uncertainty associated with finding work today stays more or less the same throughout the year. The workers strongly felt that characterising the industry and leather garments manufacturing as 'seasonal' falsely implies that there is a lot of work at any one time in the year.

Taking an average of the variant income of workers across the different seasons, those who stitch the leather garments today earn approximately Rs. 2,000-2,500 per month. This means that in some months they earn as little as Rs. 1,000 or less and in others they could earn Rs. 3,000. The piece rate system too contributes centrally to the variability of their incomes. There are workers who have been doing this work for 24 or 25 years and remain today not even marginally better off from a decade ago.

The 'master' tailor is the only 'regular' employee, and on an average gets a regular salary from the fabricator ranging between Rs. 4,000 to Rs. 5,000 per month as well as commission on every piece completed in the unit. In some units that are directly tied to the exporters, where the supervisor is on their payroll (for instance, Genuine Leather in Tuglakabad which works for HR International), the supervisor gets about Rs. 10,000 per month from the exporter, besides his commission per piece.

The workers in none of the fabricating units surveyed had an appointment letter, though some of them had been with the same fabricating unit working for the same principal employer and exporter for up to 14 years. To avoid the labour department or other governmental regulations, fabricating units rarely remain in one place for too long, and most units keep shifting their locations. Many workers tend to remain with their units wherever they go, but there is also movement of workers from one unit to another, in the hope of a slightly better income. In an average unit with about 20 workers, only about 5-6 would

have been with the same unit for 5-6 years or more. Since names and locations of units keep changing it becomes impossible to find out the year of

The Life of a Worker

Rameshwar is a leather worker. He is 30 years old. He lives in Sangam Vihar, in a room that he shares with 3 other workers. His wife and children stay in his native village in Siwan district, Bihar. His father has a small plot of land there. He belongs to the kumhar caste. His children are small, and go to the school in the village. Here in Sangam Vihar, there is no running water or electricity connection, or toilet in his room. They pay Rs. 500 for it to the landlord. The lanes are unpaved and dusty and there are no drains either. Rameshwar has been working in the leather garment-manufacturing units in Govindpuri, Tuglakabad, Okhla and Khanpur for the last 10 years. He had learnt the work from a skilled worker from his district who was already working in a fabricating unit. Rameshwar is educated and has studied upto matriculation. He came to Delhi looking for work. He did various kinds of odd jobs before coming to this trade. At that time leather work paid well. It had taken him 6 months to learn the work though he did not have a background in tailoring. He used to be able to save money and send around Rs. 1000 home. Things took a turn for the worse from around 5 years ago he feels. The fabricating unit where he is now working has shifted to 3 new locations in the area over the last 2 years to avoid governmental inspections. He gets the same piece rate he used to 10 years ago though things are now much more expensive. He is barely able to support himself in the city, leave alone send anything back home. He hopes his father is able to support his wife and children. Like many of his friends he has taken a loan from his landlord, and pays it back at an interest rate of 10% per month. Some months he only earns Rs. 500 and despairs of making ends meet. The months from April till about November are better work-wise, they are able to make more money, the fabricators are able to get more orders. On an average he earns about Rs 2000 a month, given to him in 15-day cycles. He did not have work for almost a month before the current orders that his unit got about 8 days ago. He is relatively younger and therefore manages to remain well. His fellow worker Mahesh who lives down the alley in Sangam Vihar is not so lucky. He is about 40 years old and suffers from a chronic cough. He also feels weak and debilitated many days and is unable to go to work. Rameshwar says that many of his friends who are in their 40s have very weak eyesight and hearing. The work is demanding and puts a lot of pressure on the eyes. The constant sound of the machine for 10 years has even dulled his hearing. Several worker friends of Rameshwar's have breathing problems. And yet, the fear of losing the work, being thought in any way weak and unfit by the fabricator prevents them from acknowledging this in the fabricating unit. They have no money to go to a doctor either. On days when they do not get any work, they still go to the fabricating unit. And sit around, whiling away time, smoking, chewing tobacco, talking or playing cards. After around two in the afternoon, they trudge back 'home' to their hovel.

He does not wish this work and life on his worst enemy. He desperately hopes his children will be able to have a better life.

III.

Workers' Struggle

While the story of the leather garment makers is one of misery, desperation and despair, it is also about struggle. They have been primarily attempting to better their lot through collective action by forming a union in 1999. The Delhi Leather Karigar Sangathan (DLKS) is an industry based, non-party affiliated union. This is the only existing union of leather garment workers. From our survey it seems that a considerably large percentage of the workers, at least in the south Delhi area, are sympathizers and see the union and the struggle as theirs. They have found that after their organized struggles many of the fabricating units are today forced to implement eight or nine hour workdays by stopping work by 6 p.m.

Beginnings

Ultimate Fashionmakers is one of the largest leather garments export house in north India. Its production work is done in at least 22 fabricating units in Delhi. In September 1999 the exporter announced a piece-rate reduction of Rs 50 for a particular style of garment for which workers were hitherto getting Rs 250. Workers in two Ultimate units in which this reduction was attempted to be introduced contacted workers in other units that produced leather garments for the same exporter. Nearly 400 workers from more than 15 fabricating units of Ultimate Fashion-makers that operated in the Okhla-Govindpuri-Tughlakabad Extension area came together under the banner 'Ultimate Fashionmakers Karamchari Union'. They decided to call upon all leather workers in that area, whose conditions were no better, to participate in a public meeting.

That meeting on 30 October 1999 was quite remarkable. More than 2500 workers turned up. The turnout in thousands was largely unexpected and reflected the years of oppression, pent-up frustrations, unvoiced demands and the need for organisation among a large section of the leather workers. Their main demands were: roll-back the 20 per cent reduction in the piece-rate; raise piece rates by 10%. A protest rally was held

spontaneously. The nearly 10,000-strong procession moved through the streets of Okhla, a number probably never seen in that area before that day.

Nearly 16 truckloads of riot control police and about 30 police jeeps were mobilized to disperse the workers. A number of workers were later detained at the Okhla police thana. False cases were foisted on them for disturbing the peace, causing damage to property, and trespassing. They were released on bail only the next afternoon.

Organizing workers on a platform to voice against pain, misery and oppression at the workplace has not been without struggle and conflict. During the initial organizing process, a worker Masum Ali was brutally beaten up by goons hired by a fabricator. He broke a leg, but in the absence of any organized effort on the part of the leather workers after the police had refused to record the victim's statement, no FIR could be registered. Meanwhile, work had stopped completely across the entire leather garments industry. Workers were holding meetings all over the place in groups of 50-100 each. The five persons who had secured bail were taken around in a jeep by the police to assure the workers that they had indeed been released.

Initial Terms of Agreement

On 4 November 1999, negotiations between the workers' representatives and exporters took place, rather strikingly, in the Okhla police station. Equally striking was the absence of anyone from the labour department. The terms of the agreement reached were: the piece rate would be reduced by 10 per cent instead of the earlier 20 per cent; working hours from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m; an additional payment of Rs 50 for working extra hours and on Sundays; job cards for all workers.

The exporters refused to sign the agreement. However, the first three points of the agreement were implemented in most units. In addition, workers in many units also demanded and got

an additional payment of Rs 100 as a food allowance when they were made to work overnight.

The Union Structure

On 5 November 1999, the foundation of the DLKS was formally announced. Since the executive body had to represent workers from a large number of fabricating units working for different exporters, an elaborate process of elections was devised. It is unusual for a non-party union representing numerous workplaces, with different primary employers, to be formed and that too in a bottom-up manner. It hence bears the telling in some detail.

Workers from each fabricating unit elected their presidents. Unit presidents from units producing for a single exporter were made into one group. Ten such groups were formed. Each group elected two delegates to the executive. Three activists who had emerged as leaders during the ongoing agitation were appointed as president, general secretary and treasurer. This is how a 23-member executive body was constituted.

The initial months were spent in trying to get the union registered. Officials at the Registrar of Trade Unions would repeatedly ask questions like: "Do all your members have proof of employment?" This is absurd, given that making employers give such proof was one of the main demands of the struggle in the first place. The workers had to submit affidavits that they were indeed employed in various fabricating units. A clerk demanded Rs. 1,500 as a bribe for moving the file. It is reported that such demands from the officials of the labour administration are commonplace. While the leather workers were struggling to get their union registered, the fabricators had already formed their own association, the Delhi Leather Fabricators Association (DLFA).

Boycott and Lockout

In January 2000, a tussle took place between the workers and management in two units, Taran Impex and S N Enterprises, both of which operated from B-70, Okhla Industrial Area. Both produced leather garments for Punihani

International, which is one of the top most export house in India. The workers were demanding work registers, job cards, appointment letters, overtime payment, ESI and PF. The management responded by throwing out all 102 workers.

Negotiations between the workers and the management dragged on for nearly 20 days with no sign of a possible conciliation. The management closed down the units, so that new workers could be recruited to replace the protesting workers. DLKS decided to appeal to all leather workers to boycott the B-70 units, and for a one-day token tool-down strike on 29 February 2000 in all units operating for Punihani International. While this was going on, a worker was stopped from entering a unit of Punihani International, leading to a clash with a fabricator. Pressurized by Punihani International, the Fabricators' Association closed all fabricating units in the area from 1 March, affecting nearly 15,000 workers. Exporters repeatedly claim that they have little control over the fabricating units, which supposedly operate independently of them. But this closure tells us a very different story.

This closure of units was effectively an illegal lockout. The union pasted notices on all the closed units that wages would be claimed for all days that the units remained closed. Following this, the fabricators had to open the units after three days. The DLKS demanded that workers be paid their wages for the lost work-days at the minimum daily wage rate.

The leather workers resorted to a 23-day sit-in inside the Assistant Labour Commissioner's (ALC) office in Giri Nagar, Kalkaji to get the labour administration to intervene. The officials simply stopped coming to the office during this period! Meetings were scheduled at the police station instead, because, according to the ALC, the exporters "did not feel secure in the presence of leather workers". Despite this, the fabricators and the exporters refused to turn up. A labour dispute regarding payment of wages for the lockout period was then filed at the Karkardooma labour court and the boycott of Punihani's B-70 units was withdrawn. This case was later dismissed because

over time, the workers had dispersed and could not attend the hearings.

Both the B-70 units of Punihani International were later closed down, and units opened elsewhere under another name. It is another instance of the complete illegality with which exporters and industrialists respond to what are basic, just, and statutory demands from workers. Instead of negotiating and then fulfilling what they are already required to do under law, these large exporters simply shut shop and moved these two units elsewhere, but with a different set of workers, employed under unfavourable terms. A case of retrenchment is dragging on at the Karkardooma court.

Expanding Demands

By early 2000, the leather workers' were putting forward a fresh set of demands. Besides certain political demands, such as the abolition of the contract labour system, what is striking is that most of the demands were simply asking that existing law be implemented. These included:

- abolition of contract labour system;
- payment of wages for the illegal lockout from 1 March;
- provision of ESI, PF, bonus, overtime payment, and enforcement of statutory minimum wages;
- inspection of fabrication units set up in violation of the Factory Act 1948;
- an end to the management's practice of arbitrarily closing down units in order to scuttle workers' demands;
- inspection of units by the labour department to ensure the creation and proper maintenance of service records;
- banning the practice of exporters setting up fabrication units in order to evade labour laws.

On 30 March 2000, hundreds of workers marched to the Delhi Vidhan Sabha, in support of these demands. A charter of demands was submitted to the Labour Minister Krishna Tirath, whose only response was to summon the DLC and ask him to get the DLKS registered immediately. Thus the organization was finally registered on this date.

The next day a meeting was held inside the chamber of the minister for social welfare, attended by the labour minister, the labour commissioner, the deputy labour commissioner, and the delegates of the DLKS, the DLFA and the Leather Exports Council (which comes under the commerce ministry). The exporters argued that they could not be made a party to labour disputes since they were merely traders who did not employ the workers. According to the minutes of the meeting, sent to the DLKS office by the labour ministry, the "first and main demand" of the workers – "registration of trade union" – had been fulfilled. In fact, registration was not even listed as one of the demands in the charter submitted by DLKS. The minutes also mentioned the following points of agreement:

- Written records of negotiations and terms of employment between the "employees and owners" will be maintained in accordance with the law;
- Bonus and overtime payments will be done according to legal provisions;
- The officials of the labour department will enforce legal provisions like the minimum wages act.

The officials of the labour administration also assured the workers' delegates that they would take note of violations of labour laws and take action. According to the minutes, no agreement could be reached on wages because the "workers demanded higher rates than the fabricators were willing to give." It noted that the fabricators were willing to give piece rates "fixed in accordance with the minimum wages act."

The union sent repeated complaints, first to the labour minister and then to the chief minister, that the minutes were a gross distortion of the actual negotiations. In fact, the meeting had not helped resolve any of the concrete issues. The demand for a wage board for leather workers came up for the first time during this meeting.

Struggle for Bonus

In October 2000 the DLKS decided to pressurize the labour administration to get the fabricators to pay bonus. The union wanted the

An Unaffiliated Unit

Outer Wear -a leather garment fabricating unit like several others, located in Tughlakabad Extension turns out piece work on order almost exclusively for Puniyani International. Somewhat larger in area than others – about 50 machines. Somewhat strange in its labour practices. Unusual too in the fact that not one of the workers is affiliated with the DLKS union. The owner, Ishtiaq Khan sees DLKS as an enemy and there have been pitched battles between the Ishtiaq Khan's trusted supervisors and workers and members of the Union.

When the PUDR team visited the unit, he did not allow us to speak to the workers. There appeared to be far fewer workers than machines, and the familiar noise was deafening. They were stitching a red, long ladies coat, heads down, concentrating on the design. Ishtiaq tells us that some workers were with him for 18 years and others had been coming to him for 2-3 years. There is work for about 6 months in a year. At other times they work for other fabricators. The order on which workers were working on, had only come about 4 days ago. For 3 months before that Ishtiaq had had no work or workers.

When our team tried to speak to a worker Ishtiaq called a 'worker' who had been with him for many years, who essentially echoed all he said, and debunked the union and its efforts entirely.

The workers largely come from his village in Bihar. Those who need money urgently often come to him. He 'helps' them out by loaning the money. The worker then works for him to pay off the loan. The workers work through the day when there is an order and often work 14 to 16 hours to finish the work and thus complete more pieces and earn money. The union's attempt to limit working hours (from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.) is anti-worker Ishtiaq says. The 'worker' he introduces us to verifies this, adding that their main fights with the union had been on account of this fact. Workers are here without their families. Their evenings are free. They are free to stop work when they chose to. They realize that they can earn more and finish more pieces by working till 8 p.m. or 10 p.m. or through the night. And Ishtiaq allows them to sleep in the unit too, on the work-floor.

The workers thus are hardly free agents. Coming from his own village, indebted to Ishtiaq, working, sleeping and eating in the unit to work off the loan, they are entirely tied to Ishtiaq. He does not give them PF and ESI benefits, and complains that the government troubles him by insisting on these on periodic inspections. He is able to buy off these officials easily. The union's opposition to these practices has been apparent from the outset. They have in fact written to authorities, complaining about conditions in the unit, absence of PF and ESI, failure to register under the Factories Act and so on- leading to a few of the inspections that so troubled Ishtiaq. According to Ishtiaq and his trusted 'worker' the workers themselves had fought the union on several occasions, once beating them with rods, as they were not 'allowing' them to earn more. The union leaders dispute this saying that those who fought them were not ordinary workers but some henchmen of Ishtiaq.

In this fabricating unit in Tughlakabad therefore a new system dependent labour is deployed- to produce cutting edge designs and styles of leather garments for export.

exporters and fabricators to pay the bonus, which has never been paid earlier. This was one of the agreements mentioned in the minutes of the 31 March meeting. The ALC accordingly issued letters to the fabricators. The latter did not respond. In November, the workers held an impromptu sit-in for a day at the ALC's office. The police was called in. The workers were told to fight for bonus within the units where they worked. The workers returned to their units and carried on the struggle for bonus. Police detachments went to the fabricating units and forced the workers to accept their wages without bonus. In one unit, a group of policemen, including a sub-inspector, beat up workers. Since the attackers were not in uniform, the workers took them to be goons and hit back. Then large numbers of policemen came out and lathi-charged the workers. One of the union activists met the ACP and apprised him of the situation. The ACP asked him to accompany a policeman from the Govindpuri police post, apparently "to help calm down the agitated workers and policemen." The activist was instead arrested and kept overnight in custody before he was let out on bail. He was charged with sections relating to assault and intimidation. The case is still being heard.

The workers finally did not receive any bonus.

The Wage Board Struggle

One of the demand of the DLKS it to constitute a wage board to review and fix the piece rates from time to time for different types of garments produced in the industry, and finalize some kind of recommendations. The union wanted the wage board, tripartite in character, should be represented by members of the union, leather garment exporters and fabricators along with the representatives of Delhi government.

On 21 August 2001 a meeting of representatives of the exporters, the fabricators' association and the DLKS was held at the Labour Commissioner's office. The commitment to constituting a wage board was vaguely reiterated, without arriving at any concrete decisions. The DLKS sent reminders twice over the next three

months to the Labour Commissioner requesting action towards constituting the wage board but could elicit no response.

The Labour minister and the Labour secretary held a meeting with the exporters and fabricators on 29 November. Leather workers were kept out of this meeting. The DLKS complained to the chief minister about the general indifference shown towards the problems of leather workers by the labour administration and the state government in a letter dated 6 February 2002. It again demanded the constitution of a wage board. Several reminders were sent over the following six to seven months, but to no avail. The only action was that all reminders, sent to whichever authority, were duly forwarded to the Labour secretary. The CM's office also sent a letter to the DLC requesting him "to look into the workers' demands." The DLC asserted that a wage board would have no statutory basis and serve no purpose whatsoever.

On 23 October 2002, nearly 10,000 leather workers held a demonstration at the Vidhan Sabha. The Labour minister Deep Chand Bandhu met the workers and assured them that since the labour administration was claiming there is no existing legal basis for a wage board, appropriate legislative intervention would be ensured to remove this hurdle. Delegates met the chief minister the following day and submitted a memorandum. All such meetings led to vague assurances and to no real intervention addressing the demands of the workers. This is hardly surprising. For one, a wage board applies to the industry as a whole. It would imply treating all the workers working in an industry as a collective and dealing with them as such. The management, however, prefers to fracture the workforce and deal with them on an individual basis, by worker or by unit. Two, it also implies a greater role by the state which the state is trying its best to minimise. It is hardly surprising that the number of industry-wide wage boards has declined sharply, from about 30 in the 1960s to barely two now. Out of these two, wage boards for journalist and non-journalist newspaper and news-agency employees are the only statutory wage boards.

The other wage board which was set up for sugar industry in 1985 is non-statutory. The recommendation made by any non-statutory wage board is not enforceable under the law.

On 9 December 2002 a meeting was held with the labour minister and the labour commissioner. The commissioner repeated his argument about there being no legal basis for the constitution of a wage board. He said that complaints have to be dealt with through the existing system of the labour bureaucracy. The minister mentioned the possibility of the creation of an administrative board of some sort to enable better coordination among the workers, fabricators and exporters. When the workers' delegates reminded him of earlier assurances, he suggested that a draft legislation regarding a wage board would be prepared and placed before the Delhi legislature.

Since then memoranda and reminders about the wage board demand have been doing the rounds of the offices of the various authorities.

The Piece Rate Struggle: Police hand in glove with exporters

Delhi's leather workers experienced the first three years of the new millennium with increasing privation and hardship. Piece rates fell by over 30% while the cost of living had increased, leading to a serious livelihood crisis. Most leather workers, chronically labouring on the brink of survival, were finding it more difficult than ever before to make ends meet. They were more vulnerable to arbitrary lay offs for indefinite periods (they call it "*break diya hai*"). Their plight is notwithstanding even the Second Labour Commission's recommendation that "where wages are fixed purely on piece rate basis, the employer should pay at least 75% of the notified time rated wage to the piece rated worker if the employer is not able to provide him with work" (Vol.1, Part 1, p.368).

The leather garment workers consider the piece rate arrangement as the reality in the absence of any time rated wage. The workers in this industry are not even listed as a separate category unlike the readymade garment workers. Given this situation they have not raised the demand

for time rated wages. Although DLKS considers the demand for time rated wage as their long-term strategy, but for the immediate purpose their main demand is roll-back of fall in the piece rate.

The DLKS started demanding a rolling-back of the 30% fall in piece rates. On 12 July 2003 after negotiations following a public meeting of the leather workers the exporters agreed to an increase of 10% on the lower rates. But when the workers returned to their units they found that the biggest exporters - Punihani International, Pal Enterprises and Leather Tech - had already refused to implement this agreement. This led to a standoff between the workers and these exporters.

The big exporters not only refused to implement the agreed terms but also hired goons to deal with the workers. In this regard, they seemed to have a tacit understanding with the police. During a clash between workers and the exporters' goons that occurred in Pal Enterprises on 17 July 2003, the police not only sided with the exporters but also filed a criminal case against three office holders of the DLKS who were at the Tilak Marg police station at the time of the incident.

On 19 July 2003, a huge police contingent led by the ACP, Kalkaji encircled the District Park near Okhla roundabout, where nearly 7,000 leather workers had gathered for a public meeting of the DLKS. The ACP went onstage, snatched the microphone and ordered the crowd to disperse. When the workers refused to do so, he promised to arrange a meeting of the DLKS representatives with the exporters.

The evening before the date set for the meeting by the ACP, he held a long discussion with the exporters. The ACP's office became the stage for a bizarre drama enacted the next afternoon. In the "meeting" between the exporters and the DLKS representatives, the ACP assured the exporters that they could run the units as they pleased and took upon himself the responsibility of "dealing with" the workers. After the reassured exporters left, the DLKS representatives were detained till 9 pm and threatened with dire consequences if the workers continued their struggle.

On reaching their units the next day, workers found police teams already deployed there. Workers were forced to continue working beyond eight hours since police prevented them from leaving.

A meeting of leather workers was planned for 5 August at a park in Okhla to collectively discuss ways to deal with this latest attack. Local police, including the ACP (Kalkaji), refused permission despite a Delhi High Court order allowing workers to assemble and hold demonstrations beyond 50 metres from the gates of the units. On the morning of 5 August police informed that permission for the meeting had been denied. Anticipating this, the DLKS had already booked the Labour Welfare Hall at Govindpuri, as an alternative venue. But, half an hour later, police returned to pick up the leaders. Workers arriving at the District Park found police camped inside. Some workers went away, yet more than 700 workers assembled at the new venue in the sweltering heat. There they decided to proceed to the Govindpuri Police Station to demand release of the nine leading activists.

Heavy security was brought in to handle this situation: about five busloads of paramilitary (CRPF) and armed police equipped with automatic weapons and tear gas dispensers. The

workers refused to budge. The ACP was forced to hold talks with the detained activists and their lawyer and after more than three hours the activists were released.

On 8 August DLKS was called to the police station for talks with a delegation of exporters. The exporters refused to increase the piece rates and were assured by the ACP that the police would ensure the smooth running of their enterprises in case workers do not accept their terms and resort to creating trouble. When the DLKS stated its resolve to hold demonstrations at the exporters offices, activists were again summoned by the ACP and warned. Finally small groups of 10 workers were allowed to hold token demonstrations.

The DLKS leaders felt that such token actions would serve no purpose and dropped the idea. Thus the exporters successfully employed their close links with the police to prevent the workers from exerting democratic pressure for getting their demands accepted. For the last one year DLKS has been trying to create awareness among workers on their rights and the issues of their struggles by holding small meetings at different places and attempting to consolidate their work in a sustained manner.

IV.

Conclusion

The conditions of labour in Delhi's industries are dismal at best. For a large majority of workers, proof of employment itself is lacking – a fact that inevitably leads to the denial of all benefits, be it medical facilities, provident fund or gratuity. Legally stipulated minimum wages, an eight-hour working day, or else acknowledgment of overtime and payment for such work are unheard of. Attempts by workers to organise to voice these issues or for collective bargaining are usually met by brute force. That each of the above is a violation of established law has led to no action on the part of labour departments to bring employers in line. The

labyrinth of the labour dispute mechanism only exaggerates the limited relative staying power of labour engaged in a confrontation with capital. Attempts by employers to marshal the police to browbeat workers who protest against this state of affairs is commonplace.

Despite the creation of a union five years ago, the gains have been limited. Yet workers engaged in the manufacture of leather garments face an additional set of circumstances that weaken their position vis-à-vis their employers. The first among them arises from the fact that they produce goods for a far-away market. The factors that determine continued employment lie

far beyond their control. Governmental policies, policies of other countries' governments, international politics, attacks on labour in another country, international tariffs, subsidies and quotas or their removal, all affect the remuneration and usefulness of their labour and skill. Having no contact with the firms that have requisitioned the product, they have much lesser scope for collective bargaining.

But scope for bargaining even with those controlling the production in India is inhibited by the structure of the industry. Brand owners supply the final product to consumers in the affluent western countries at lucrative prices. They channel the products through buying houses. The exporters in India who bag contracts from the buying houses for producing and supplying the product engage in little in-house production and primarily sub-contract the work to small fabricators to reduce both the labour costs as well as supervision. The sub-contracting is then used as a basis by exporters to argue that they are mere merchants and therefore not party to labour disputes in production. The falsity of this claim is clearly brought out by the fact that exporters do operate production facilities, for this is a necessity for them to obtain contracts in the first place. The supply price that they quote to the buying houses includes a calculation that includes labour costs. It is therefore only their attempt to devour a part of the wage bill that results in sub-contracting as is aptly clear from the higher wages paid to in-house workers. In fact their interest in sub-contracting is visible by the fact that in most cases exporters themselves promote fabricating units or even indirectly own them. This structure fragments the large workforce engaged in leather garment production and forces them to bargain with employers many of who were skilled tailors themselves in not so distant a past. Effective collective bargaining therefore requires industry level organisation of workers – a task achieved, yet difficult to maintain since the specific payment levels and conditions of labour vary across units.

An added disadvantage concerns the form of wages – piece rate instead of the usual time rate. In the case of garments such a stipulation is

near impossible given the ever-changing description of the product. The piece-rate form of payment impacts negatively on workers in at least three ways. The first derives from the lack of a stipulated minimum. Even if wages in piece rate terms were equivalent to time-rate wages, the inflation in prices of all goods over time would lead to a fall in piece-rate wages since the provision for additional compensation to offset such fall in wages built into the time rate system does not exist for piece-rates. Secondly, a change in the form of the product would require a renegotiation of the piece-rate. The outcome of this renegotiation would be determined by the strength of organisation of workers. The above two effectively imply that piece-rate systems make it all that much harder for workers to preserve the gains made at one point in time. Thirdly, payment by piece-rates practically involves trifling the concept of the length of the working day. Workers do not oppose it, given their low wages and the opportunity it creates for an additional earning. For employers it works as a manna, since workers can be paid lesser per unit of the product while keeping their real wages constant i.e increasing the return on each rupee spent on labour. In normal course such increases can be achieved only through costly investments in plant and machinery and displacing the labour. However, in case of leather garment this can be done to a limited extent as the industry is characterised as labour intensive and worker displacement is not possible after a point. It is clear from the above that allowing for piece-rate systems of payment necessitates a much greater role for labour departments and a high degree of organisation of the workforce.

The leather garments industry had for long lacked any workers organisation whatsoever. Given the multiplicity of employers and the small number of workers in each production unit, effective workers organisation was difficult to come by. This ensured the absence of labour disputes and since labour departments see their role only in the context of a labour dispute, any initiative to ensure proper wages and working conditions was lacking. The formation of the DLKS as an industry-wide association radically

altered matters. The attempt of the union to force a variety of state institutions, led not to a greater sensitivity on the part of those institutions, but to the entry of the police as an arbiter in labour disputes. Not only is the police ill suited to this purpose and hence its involvement is to be deemed illegal, the specific role was solely one of assurances to owners that workers would be brow-beaten into reporting for work. That such a task could be 'formally' undertaken by the police and without any visible criticism from labour departments holds dangerous portents for the future.

In the light of the above findings, P U D R demands that:

- ❑ The workers in the leather garment industry be assured their due wages- these should be at least on par with the time-rated wages, i.e., minimum wages stipulated in law.
 - ❑ The exporters be regarded as the principal employers of the workers and held responsible for their wages, working conditions etc.
 - ❑ Regular inspections of the fabricating units be undertaken by labour inspectors to ensure that safe and sanitary working conditions are maintained in the units, muster rolls are maintained and ESI and PF benefits be given and defaulting employers be penalised.
 - ❑ The involvement of the police in labour affairs as has been occurring in this context be halted with immediate effect. Action be taken against the police officials who have in the past acted at the behest of the exporters and fabricators against the workers.
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Behind the Label

*The condition of workers
in the
Delhi leather garments industry*

People's Union for Democratic Rights
Delhi
October 2004

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About PUDR

Over the last 20-30 years, the civil rights movement in India has emerged as an independent one in defence of civil liberties and democratic rights of our people. The People's Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR), Delhi, is part of this movement. In 1976-77, it was part of a larger national forum of PUCL and DR and became PUDR on 1 February, 1981.

In the last two and a half decades of its existence the organisation has taken up hundreds of instances of violations of democratic rights covering most parts of the country and involving the rights of many sections of society. The rights of life, liberty and equality, freedom of expression, the right to struggle against oppression and the right to association are essential for the functioning of a just, democratic state and society.

Some of the issues taken up by PUDR over the years include workers' rights, agrarian movements, forest policy, displacement, communal riots, caste massacres, and repression on dalits, encounter killings, deaths and rapes in custody, anti-democratic laws, death penalty and rights of women inside the family. PUDR conducts investigations, publishes reports, issues statements, distributes leaflets, organises public meetings, demonstrations and dharnas and fights legal cases to highlight the violation of people's rights and to help towards their redressal.

PUDR is a non-funded democratic rights organisation, meeting its expenditures entirely through the sale of its literature with activists giving their time on a voluntary basis. PUDR is not affiliated to any political party. Anyone can come for the weekly activist meetings where ideas, issues and suggestions are discussed and debated in an informal atmosphere. To date not a single weekly meeting has been missed. Members include people from all walks of life. If you wish to know more about us or become associated with PUDR please write to us at the address given below.

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