

Indian worker left to die on Nokia assembly line

By Arun Kumar
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On October 31, a young female worker was left to die on the assembly line at the Nokia factory in southern India after her head and neck got trapped and crushed inside a robotic loading machine. The horrifying incident exposed conditions that prevail in most of the country's factories, where human life and limb are subordinated to the drive to reap profits off of cheap labor.

Nokia, the world's largest manufacturer of mobile telephones, employs around 7,000 workers at its Sriperumbudur plant, 40 kilometers from Chennai, the capital of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Seventy percent of the workers are female. Based in Finland, Nokia has over 123,000 employees in 120 countries, sales in more than 150 countries, global annual revenue of €41 billion and operating profit of €1.2 billion as of 2009.

Ambika, the worker killed in the incident, was 22 years old. The daughter of an agricultural worker in Puttithangal village, in Vellore District of Tamil Nadu, she was survived by her parents as well as a younger sister and a brother. The entire family depended upon her income from her job at the Nokia plant, a monthly salary of just 8,500 rupees (\$US170). She had worked at the factory for three years.

Ambika worked on an assembly line machine which loads panels into a magazine rack, which then moves through a conveyor belt into a metal box. On the night of October 31, while she was working, the conveyor belt got stuck and the sensor controlling the machinery stopped functioning, which was not uncommon. Despite repeated complaints by workers to technicians and line managers, this problem was simply ignored by company authorities.

When the machine gets repeatedly stuck in this manner while in operation, the workers normally pull

the conveyor belt manually, sticking their head inside the machine (under the metal box). They prefer to rectify the problem themselves instead of calling the technicians, as they are under constant pressure to increase production and fear waiting even for 10-15 minutes for help.

When Ambika tried to solve the problem in this way, the sensor suddenly started functioning and the metal box came down, trapping her head and neck under it. While her co-workers rushed to her rescue and pushed the emergency button on the machine, the action did not release her head.

The only way to get her head out of the machinery was to press the main emergency button shutting down production. None of her co-workers on the factory floor had access to this button. The workers on the next assembly line called the technicians and line managers. According to co-workers, the plant authorities refused to press the main emergency button, saying the production process could not be stopped.

Ambika was caught in the machinery at 6.50 pm and remained trapped for 20 minutes, with her head and neck crushed, writhing in pain and with blood pouring from her nose and mouth, before her co-workers were finally able to pull her out.

According to press reports, after Ambika was taken to the hospital, Nokia's shift manager, Purushothaman, ordered co-workers to return to the assembly line, assuring them that "She is alright". Angered workers confronted him, asking: "Would you behave like this if it was one from your family?"

When the workers refused to resume work, line managers warned them they would have to face the consequences for the loss of hundreds of thousand rupees the company would incur as a result suspending production.

The next day, sensing the angry mood of the workers, Nokia management declared a holiday. On that day, workers gathered at the Apollo hospital premises, where Ambika had died after being brought for treatment.

The circumstances of Ambika's death clearly expose the stark realities behind the growth of India's manufacturing sector and the backward conditions that prevail beneath the veneer of the high-tech sector.

The Nokia workers reported that, while fatalities like this have not happened before, there has always been the danger of losing life or limb since the machines were not functioning properly and, despite their complaints, were not repaired. They accused the management of not taking steps to fix the sensor that caused Sunday's accident, despite their repeated pleas. The sensor had not been working for the past six months.

The workers said that injuries were common in the stamping room, where regularly their fingers get crushed and injured inside the stamping machines. Due to pressure to meet high production targets, the workers keep on working like machines on these assembly lines, risking their lives.

The leaders of the Labour Progressive Front (LPF), affiliated to Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the ruling party of Tamil Nadu and also a partner of Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) national government, have come out in defence of Nokia over death of Ambika, blaming the young worker for her own death. The LPF has a union branch at Nokia, which is the only union recognized by the management because of its open collaboration in suppressing the workers.

M. Shanmugam, LPF general secretary, has intervened to shift the blame from the company for Ambika's death. The union official claimed that she was operating a punching machine and chatting when her hand got caught in the machine and crushed. "She panicked while trying to free herself and, in the process, lost her balance, slipped and fell into the slot and the machine crushed her head and neck", he told *The Telegraph*. He said: "The mishap was because of inattention on the part of the worker and there was little time for others to rescue her."

The union bureaucrat's story flatly contradicts the accounts told by Ambika's co-workers, who witnessed

the incident and have clearly placed the blame on the company. His intervention to provide Nokia with an alibi for the industrial murder of a young worker is in line with the role played by the DMK government, which has sent its police forces to crush workers' struggles in several factories in Tami Nadu, including Hyundai, Foxconn and BYD Electronics.

The criminal negligence of basic safety by Nokia management is only one expression of the brutal working conditions imposed by the transnational corporations in their drive for profits. These intolerable conditions have been one of key factors leading to the eruption of the current strike wave in factories in southern India, including those in Sriperumbudur.

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