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## Country Profile: Tunisia

**In March 2005 Clean Clothes Campaign International Secretariat staff visited Tunisia to meet with unions and other civil society organisations, share the work of the Clean Clothes Campaign and hear about the situation in the garment industry in Tunisia. As an important production country for European retailers, there is a need for stronger relationships with organisations in Tunisia.**

The garment and textile industry is of major importance for Tunisia. In 2002, clothing and textile exports represented 46.8% of Tunisia's total exports of manufactured goods, being worth around €3.2 billion per year. There are 2,135 companies in Tunisia in the garment industry that employ over 10 people, making up about 80% of the total industry according to recent estimates. 1,690 companies produce for export. Nine hundred and ninety-seven companies are in mixed ownership - Tunisia and foreign, sixty-three are 100% foreign owned.

Tunisia is among the top 15 garment suppliers in the world, and has the

advantage of being close to the European market. It is the fifth largest supplier to the European Union, as well as the leading trouser supplier to the EU. Other important products are work wear and lingerie. The main foreign investors in the garment industry in Tunisia are (in order of importance) France, Germany, Belgium and Italy (Just Style, 2003).



Workers in a jeans factory in Tunisia.

### **The subcontracting industry**

Most of the organisations the CCC met with felt that the industry in Tunisia was in a severe crisis, which has serious implications since the garment and textile industry employs about half of the working population. Between 2000 and 2005 the industry lost 80,000 jobs and in the last three years 600 factories closed down. The Multifiber Arrangement phase-out has so far had an enormous effect on the sector in

### **Work wear factory case**

One Tunisian factory that CCC staff were informed about, produces protective overalls for use in hospitals in France and other countries. The factory dismissed 26 of the 400 workers, of which four were trade unionists and the other 22 were supportive of

Tunisia and most organisations are expecting the final results to be even more disastrous.

The precarious nature of the industry was emphasised by many organisations. There is no added value created in Tunisia as most of the factories subcontract from either the parent company or from other foreign clients with only the cut-make-trim part done in Tunisia. To underline this, when talking about the garment sector, all involved call it the "subcontracting industry".

Tunisia does have some advantages in the global scramble for orders in the garment sector. Short delivery times and a favourable investment climate are frequently mentioned. On the downside, unions pointed out that there are many countries that have cheaper labour costs and that there is severe competition from within the region, from Morocco for example. Trade unions and other organisations are looking at ways for the industry to survive, which could include focussing on the high end of the market - on complicated, technical products. They feel the government should provide training to the workers to enable them to work in this high-end sector.

the trade union. There was a short strike to get the women reinstated. The union tried to talk to the management, but the management refused to reinstate the workers. Therefore workers went on a three-day strike, supported by most of the workers. The factory does not pay social security for the workers, although it is deducted from their wages, and so workers do not get health care and retirement benefits. Workers are reportedly hit by managers. The workers do not get wage slips and are paid less than 200 dinar (€123), which is the minimum wage.

### **Working conditions**

Insecurity of employment is seen as one of the most severe problems in the sector in Tunisia, caused by the increasing use of temporary contracts and companies closing down. Companies are using a loophole in the law that allows them to employ workers without offering a stable contract. Increasingly workers have gone on strike to protest against not being paid for months on end. Sudden closure without paying workers' salaries and severance pay are the order of the day. Other concerns mentioned were workers not getting paid the minimum salary, workers not getting social security and sexual harassment. There are cases where women have been working for 30 years for a factory and still do not get social security, as the employer has never registered them even though contributions are deducted from workers' wages every month. The unions feel powerless seeing many companies closing and others threatening to do the same.

### **ATDF - the Association of Democratic Women**

One of the organisations visited was the Association Tunisienne Des Femmes Democratres (ATDF), the association of democratic women. Through organising debates, training and campaigns they are working against all forms of discrimination against women, encouraging women to take the lead in finding solutions for their problems, and advancing the participation of women in civil and political life. They offer support to women that have been the victim of violence and discrimination.

Because most of the workers in the garment sector are women (as in most other countries) and seeing the importance for the employment and economic situation in Tunisia, the ATDF is looking at issues that concern workers in the garment industry. One suggestion they have brought up is to start a centre, in cooperation with other NGOs, that would work with women in the subcontracting industry and in homework.

The ATDF has carried out research on sexual harassment and has started a centre de l'ecoute, a centre for women to come to and get help having faced sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is a large problem in Tunisia and there

is a low level of understanding of the problem and how to address it. A law against sexual harassment was recently adopted but instead of drawing attention to the problem of sexual harassment the government introduced the law through a campaign against every form of "sexually provocative" behaviour (which can even include walking hand in hand).

### **Companies Sourcing in Tunisia**

**From France:** Absorba, Balmain, Cacharel, Camaieu, Celio, Chevignon, Chipie's, Lacoste, Guy Laroche, Naf Naf, Petit Bateau, Prénatal, Rodier, Yves-Saint-Laurent, 3 Suisses

**From Italy:** Benetton, Diesel, Marzotto

**From Germany:** adidas, Mustang, Speedo, Triumph

**From Belgium:** Brunotex, Sioen, Staels

**From the UK:** Lee Cooper, Next

**From the US:** Lee, Wrangler, Gap, Hanes, Levi Strauss, Reebok, Russell, Fila

**From Sweden:** H&M

**From Spain:** Inditex

Compiled from various sources (2004, 2005).

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