

G4 Securicor sneers at Mozambique labour rights

A global campaign has been launched against G4 Securicor for its violations of human and labour rights. **Beata Mtyingizana** examines one country, Mozambique, where such abuses take place and highlights the company's defiant arrogance.

Trade unions organising across Group 4 Securicor globally are stepping up activities to ensure that the world's largest security company respects trade union rights and pays fair wages. A meeting in Nyon, Switzerland of the UNI Property Services G4S Alliance demanded a global agreement with the company to ensure core labour standards for 470 000 workers in 104 countries. G4S is one of Africa's biggest employers with 65 000 employees in 18 African countries.

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) based in the United States has identified a number of multinational companies whose employment practices in the service sector violate labour standards in host countries. They of course include the giant conglomerate, Group 4 Securicor (G4S).

The company insists in its mission statement that "integrity" is among its fundamental principles. But it is in fact one of the world's worst employers and violates both the labour and human rights of people in its employment.

Proponents of fixed direct investment argue that multinationals hold the key to growing joblessness in Africa and

elsewhere in the developing world, and that they give host countries an improved balance of payments and domestic fixed capital formation, as well as allowing for managerial and technological spill-overs and resource transfers.

The activities of G4S suggest otherwise. A study commissioned in April 2007 this year by the SEIU and UNI (the global union) on the nature and extent of the company's labour rights' violations in Mozambique, reported that it had refused to comply with local labour laws and had ridden roughshod over human rights protected in the Mozambican constitution.

MOZAMBIQUE: PLETHORA OF VIOLATIONS

The study found that G4S's operation in Mozambique had neither brought the country significant economic benefits nor facilitated technological and resource transfers. Since it acquired Wackenhut Mozambique in May 2002, the media has reported that workers' conditions have rapidly deteriorated.

The study revealed that most G4S workers are semi-literate men and women between 26 and 35 years of age. Of the 80 workers interviewed,

35% reported that their schooling had not gone beyond primary level, while 34% reported some secondary schooling.

Because of their low literacy levels, 24% of the workers interviewed said they did not understand their employment conditions. "Some of these contracts are in English and we speak Portuguese," said one worker. "They call someone in to translate what is in the contract then they tell you to sign. When asked if you understand, you reply 'yes' for two reasons; firstly you need employment, and you would sign whether you understood the terms or not. Secondly, most of the things that would be translated sounded okay, irrespective of the fact that they may not necessarily be so on paper. So you just sign and hope everything is as translated."

More than half of the workers (54%) said they did not have copies of their employment contracts because G4S held on to them. And just over 20% said they had not signed a contract at all. Joao (not his real name) affirmed that when he was offered employment, there was no mention of contracts. "They just asked if I wanted to work, whether I am a hard worker and can work



night shifts, and I said yes... Patrao (the boss) then told me to start work the next day."

Mozambican law provides that the absence of a written document does not affect the validity of an employment contract or the rights acquired by an employee. Where the job tenure is not contractually specified, the law presumes that employees are permanent.

Despite this, workers accuse G4S of hiring and firing at will, ignoring the dismissal procedures set out in Mozambican labour law.

In addition, the law stipulates that salary levels should correspond with the country's growth in productivity and economic development. But G4S continues to pay its workers below the minimum wage.

Maria Alice, director of professional relations in the National Labour Directorate, told that the monthly minimum wage in the security sector was Meticals Novo 1 443 (about R400). Of the 80 security workers interviewed, 25% earned below this. More than two thirds (69%) reported that they were married, while another 30% were unmarried but responsible for the care of friends, grandparents or younger siblings. Fourteen per cent were responsible for up to 11 dependants.

Just over 48% of the workers reported that G4S does not provide sick leave, withholds payment for days when they are off sick and fires them if they fail to submit a

doctor's note. Some 74% of the respondents reported having no private health insurance, although they are required to contribute to the National Institute for Social Security. By failing to provide health cover, the company is in breach of Mozambican labour law, which stipulates that all workers have a right to social security.

The SEIU study also found that 71% of workers interviewed did not have lunch or tea breaks - again a violation of labour law. This stipulates that a normal workday must be interrupted by a minimum break of 30 minutes and a maximum break of two hours after five hours of consecutive work.

Mr Moamba (not real name), a 49-year-old man with two wives and 16 children, said he started working for Wackenhut in January 1996. He worked a 12-hour day, four days a week for a monthly wage of Mtn 1 620 (about R450). Despite the ban on lunch breaks, he was prohibited from eating at his work station. "I found myself having to eat a lot before leaving home and after work, because during work I am not allowed to eat," he said. "When I get very hungry, I just try to sneak food in and sometimes ask a colleague to cover for me while I take two minutes to eat."

However, he said he was lucky to work at the US Embassy because it had toilet facilities. A number of workers interviewed reported that these were not provided at many

workplaces. Workers deployed outside a casino, for example, reported that they were banned from using the casino's toilets and forced to relieve themselves in the bush.

Mr Moamba, like a number of G4S employees servicing the United States Embassy in Maputo, had his contract terminated in July 2006 following the embassy's refusal to renew its contract with G4S because of its employment practices. At first he and other workers were not particularly aggrieved because the embassy told them they would soon be rehired by SafeTech Security.

The twist however was that SafeTech was taken over by G4S soon afterwards. It invited retrenched employees to reapply for their jobs, but gave them no preference. This, combined with its practice of hiring younger men, who are fitter and have fewer family responsibilities, meant that Moamba and others did not get their jobs back. They were retrenched with three months' notice.

When they did not receive severance packages or overtime payments, they approached Alice Mabota, director of the Mozambican Human Rights League (Liga). Liga is often asked to intervene in workplace grievances because Mozambican trade unions are generally weak. The country has no labour court and there is a large backlog of civil cases. Mabota has

successfully challenged a number of companies, forcing them to respect workers' rights.

G4S DISPUTE WITH STATE

Most G4S workers do 12-hour shifts, and some say they are required to put in shifts of 14 and even 24 hours. Media reports have identified G4S' employment practices as one of the reasons for the company's inability to retain service contracts with its clients. Where a client reached a decision to terminate its association with G4S, it is workers who often suffer as they are left without jobs.

Said one worker: "I am meant to start working at 5pm and knock off at 7am... but when my colleague does not pitch for work, Patrao tells me to take his shift and continue working till 5pm the next day. And still they don't give me the salary for that extra day."

Before March 2005, G4S did not pay overtime at all. When it did introduce overtime, not all workers were paid it. Those that were paid said they did not receive the full amount due to them.

Realising that the company was breaking the law by not paying overtime, about 2 000 workers formed a trade union committee, which submitted claims for overtime they had worked between 1994 and 2005. Six hundred had already been retrenched, leading to a dispute over whether they had valid claims. Because of a lack of clarity about what the company owed workers, a technical committee was set up to determine the amount. In July 2005, the labour department established an arbitration committee to smooth the process.

However, G4S rejected the committee's determinations and applied for a reinterpretation of the law used in the calculations. In

Global campaign for worker rights

Unions across Group 4 Securicor called for a thorough investigation into G4S for breaching the guidelines for the behaviour of multinationals laid down by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Delegates signed an appeal to the British trade union centre, the TUC, to ensure the British government follows up on the complaint, lodged under OECD procedures in the home country of an offending multinational.

The complaint is the first against a multinational for breaching the guidelines in multiple countries. It alleges violations of OECD guidelines on sustainable development and the rights of workers to organise into trade unions. Violations cover Nepal, Mozambique, Israel, USA, Malawi, Uganda, Congo Germany, Panama and Uruguay.

In South Africa the company has withdrawn its recent threat to de-recognise Cosatu affiliate Satawu (SA Transport and Allied Workers Union), which has raised issues around working hours and racist abuse.

The security guard union in Malawi will be the first beneficiary of legal aid for Africans with a donation of 10,000 Swiss francs. G4S violates Malawian law through non-payment of overtime and annual leave and for unfair strike dismissals.

Unions plan to keep up the pressure on the organisers of the World Cup and the Olympics over awarding lucrative security contracts. The UNI G4S Alliance wants organisers to look at the security giant's labour record around the world. UNI general secretary Philip Jennings is pressing for a meeting with David Higgins, the chief executive of the Olympic Delivery Authority for the 2012 London Olympics.

addition, the arbitration committee decided that G4S was not liable for the payment of workers no longer in its service after February 2005. The Minister of Labour, Helena Taipo, then intervened, ordering G4S to pay all the workers. G4S refused, with human resources director John Mortimer boasting at a press conference that the company was not obliged to pay anything, and that if the minister or anyone else objected, they should take the matter to court.

The Mozambican media reported that Taipo then threatened to withdraw Mortimer's work permit, accusing him of challenging her authority and Mozambican law, undermining dialogue and destabilising labour relations. Mortimer objected that the minister did not have the necessary

authority. A tribunal, which determines the legality of government administrative acts, ruled in his favour, overruling Taipo's move to cancel his work permit.

According to media reports, the court absolved G4S of poor employment practices and ruled that "restoring an environment of dialogue cannot be achieved simply by annulling the petitioner's work permit". Taipo announced that she would appeal against the decision, leaving the substantive issue of the money owed by Wackenhut/G4S to its former Maputo employees unresolved. LB

Beata Mtyingizana is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand.