



LIFE OF WORKERS AT INDUSTRIAL PARKS AND EXPORT PROCESSING ZONES IN VIETNAM – CURRENT SITUATION AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract:

After decades of renovation, the rapid development of our country's industry has resulted in a rapid increase in the number of workers working at industrial parks and export processing zones. In addition to advantages, such as skill level, sense of style, discipline, income, etc. of workers have increased, there are also many problems, namely accommodation, learning opportunity, mental and recreational life of workers are not guaranteed. At the same time, the existing risk of a generation of workers who "prematurely retire" and become a burden of unemployment of society is posing itself as a problem that is yet solved. Obviously, this problem required the attention of workers, business owners and state management agencies alike; however, it cannot be dealt with after one night. The fact that a considerably large number of workers who are just rushing to work for money, satisfied with a barely enough living conditions and accept that these difficulties drag on will persist unless the government and the entire society soon have appropriate solutions.

Keywords: life of workers, industrial parks; export processing zones

1. Introduction

Over the past years, the development of industrial parks and export processing zones has made an important contribution to fundamentally changing the appearance and structure of the economy, promoting the process of industrialization and modernization, building technical facilities, creating competitive advantages and gradually taking the country towards a knowledge economy. Along with economic growth and development, in the process of industrialization and modernization, industrial parks and export processing zones have created and added to the Vietnamese workforce a generation of workers who are dynamic, young, creative and full of life. They are truly continuing the

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pioneering tradition of the Vietnamese workforce in the cause of national liberation, and today are the main force to build and develop the country in the period of industrialization, modernization and international economic integration, taking Vietnam to stand "*shoulder to shoulder with powerful countries across five continents.*"

Currently, though only account for over 14% of the population and 27% of the society's workforce, Vietnamese workers create more than 65% of gross domestic products and more than 70% of the state budget annually.ⁱⁱ In the integration trend, the ability to attract investment, apply and absorb modern technology, as well as the growth rate and competitiveness of the economy depend largely on the quality of the workforce, especially those at industrial parks and export processing zones - the main army for industrialization and modernization.

It is worth affirming that the contributions of workers to the country's renovation cause are great and important. In implementing the renovation policy, Vietnamese workers has also grown and matured both in quantity and quality. However, in addition to the strengths and advantages, the industrial workers are also revealing many limitations and shortcomings. The downside of market economy, as well as the pressure from competition and globalization trend under the strong development of science and technology are posing new challenges to the workers of our country.

According to the latest statistics, the majority of workers at industrial parks and export processing zones are young people. Those at the age of 18 to 30 account for 36% of the total number of active workers. Particularly, at foreign-invested enterprises, workers from 18 to 25 years old account for 43.42%. This "rejuvenation" trend is increasing in quantity and quality due to the huge need to expand production. In terms of both immediate and long term, this is the workforce that is desperately in need of comprehensive training, orientation and attention in all aspects. They are concurrently the owners and valuable assets of the country, the driving force of development and the people that the Party and the State must pay special attention to. However, looking at the current living conditions of workers at industrial parks and export processing zones, there are many pressing problems that need to be studied and resolved.

2. Quality of human resources

The leading factor of the social productive force is the worker, the employee. The ideal image we are aiming at is those who are educated, have good health, in-depth expertise and skills, and creativity. Obviously, we cannot integrate to and compete successfully in the marketplace with a workforce in which most of them are untrained and do not have the necessary professional capacity to match real-life challenges and requirements today. Most importantly, this workforce comprises of young workers with a long way to go in the future, thus the pressure of the knowledge economy and the globalization trend on their shoulders is huge and is getting fiercer.

ⁱⁱ Minh Duyen: Vietnamese workforce - the vanguard of the Vietnamese revolution, baokiemtoannhanuoc, April 27, 2020

3. Ethical qualities, sociopolitical sense, culture and lifestyle

It can be confirmed with certainty that the vast majority of workers, despite coming from many different backgrounds, still retains good traditional qualities. They are responsible and ethical workers with a high sense of their social class and self-esteem. However, we cannot be indifferent to negative phenomena and manifestations which are obscuring and tarnishing the beautiful image of Vietnamese workers. According to current survey data, the living environment of workers in the Southern key economic region has many negative sides due to the impact of social evils, such as: gambling, theft, drugs, prostitution, domestic violence, etc.

When being asked about their status and role in the society, only 25.7% are proud to be workers and owners of the country, and 56% accept their current position. Meanwhile, 11.8% are dissatisfied with their current social status and consider themselves doing menial job and not respected by the community.ⁱⁱⁱ

The most prominent aspect of workers' sociopolitical consciousness is the issue of "spontaneous strike" that has been emerging in the last ten years. According to statistics of Vietnam General Confederation of Labor (VGCL), from 2010 to date, there have been 3,146 strikes in 40 provinces and cities. The number of strikes in 3 years alone (from 2013 to the end of June 2016) was 1,000, and according to the latest report of MOLISA, there were 132 strikes in the first 6 months of 2016; in which, foreign-invested enterprises accounted for 66.5%; private enterprises accounted for 30%; and state-owned enterprises accounted for 6.9%. Most of the abovementioned strikes took place in the southern key economic zone (Ho Chi Minh City: 522, accounted for 40.4%; Binh Duong: 279, accounted for 21.8%; Dong Nai: 255, accounted for 19.9%).^{iv} There are many causes leading to strikes, so it is not that the workers are entirely at fault. However, spontaneous strikes that do not comply with legal provisions (even if those provisions are inconsistent and unclear) are also a manifestation of the limitations in workers' sense of sociopolitical responsibility.

In terms of worker's attitude, there are also many complicated problems. 68.3% of workers at private and foreign-invested enterprises are lacking passion and interest in doing their job. Such attitude certainly cannot create productivity, quality and efficiency. That attitude is nowhere near industrial working style and even strange and opposite to the market economy - one that requires hard work, creativity, dynamics and efficiency.

Thus, to a certain extent, it can be seen that worker's psychology of their social status is having problems. In other words, their negative attitude towards their social status and work will become a factor that adversely affects their work performance and labor discipline - elements that pay a particular important role in creating the competitiveness of each and every enterprise as well as of the entire economy.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.congdoan.vn/tin-tuc/tuyen-truyen-giao-duc-3576/dia-vi-chinh-tri-kinh-te-xa-hoi-cua-giai-cap-cong-nhan-viet-nam-hien-nay-va-kien-nghi-dai-hoi-xiii-cua-dang-570111.tld>

^{iv} <http://www.congdoan.vn/tin-tuc/quan-he-lao-dong-505/de-dinh-cong-dung-luat-125532.tld>

4. Work intensity and income of workers

The Labor Law of our country stipulates that workers work no more than 8 hours a day and no more than 48 hours a week; but in fact, business owners are using all possible means to increase work intensity and prolong work hours. Workers at most of textile and garment enterprises work overtime regularly, the average number of work hours exceeding the stipulated time is over 200 hours a year. It means that each textile worker is in charge of 14 machines and walks an average distance of 25km per day. With the above work intensity, each worker has to walk 650km a month, and in 3 months, the distance they have to walk is equal to the distance between Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Workers in fishery and footwear industries have not less work. They normally work 8 to 12 hours a day. Furthermore, they have to work in cold temperature of below 0°C. After each working day, many workers suffer from leg edema or respiratory diseases. Such work intensity will definitely affect the health and long-term happy life of workers, especially those working in textile, garment, footwear, fishery industries, etc.- where most of workers are female.

There are also many issues regarding quality of life and health care. In general, the income of workers at industrial parks and export processing zones is, without a doubt, higher than the income in rural areas. Therefore, due to the need for jobs to make a living, the number of migrant workers in industrial centers is increasing. However, the current income level is just enough for them to feed themselves, and there is not much left for savings. The average income of workers in Quarter IV/2020 is 7.4 million VND a month, in which: salary: 5.22 million; overtime pay: 934,000; bonus and hard-working incentive: 2.1 million.^v

In addition to salary, every year, most enterprises give a bonus to their workers; however, the highest bonus does not exceed 3 months' average salary. The lowest bonus ranges from 200,000 VND to 800,000 VND a year. There is also another source of income from working overtime, but most overtime work is not paid in proportion to the labor that workers have spent. From the fact stated above, it can be seen that the living standards of workers are not considered well-off compared to the general standard in industrial and urban centers, especially in the southern key economic zone.

5. Housing and recreation

Housing is also a current pressing issue of workers at industrial parks and export processing zones. According to local statistics, most of workers at industrial parks and export processing zones have demand for accommodation, but the ability to meet the demand is very low. By 2020, there are about 1.7 million workers at industrial zones require an accommodation, in which, workers from other provinces account for more than 50% of the total number of workers at industrial zones, most of which are in Binh

^v <https://vietstock.vn/2020/12/thu-nhap-trung-binh-thang-cua-cong-nhan-74-trieu-dong-4260-814964.htm>

Duong Province (more than 90%), Ho Chi Minh City (63%); Dong Nai Province (60%), etc.

According to local reports, there have been 100 worker housing projects completed with about 41,000 apartments to accommodate about 330,000 workers. However, this can only meet about 28% of the demand. Ho Chi Minh City currently has about 187,000 enterprises, including 1,100 enterprises with 377,000 workers at 17 industrial parks, export processing zones and high-tech parks and 21 industrial clusters. However, the city has only addressed 15% of workers' housing need. Similarly, Long An Province has 16 industrial parks and 20 industrial clusters with more than 10,000 enterprises and about 300,000 workers, both from the province and from other provinces. However, the construction of housing for workers has only met 2% to 3% of the need.^{vi} Therefore, it is necessary to have resources from socialization. Regarding rooms for rent around industrial parks in Dong Nai, there are rooms that are only 12m² but accommodate 2-3 couples at the same time. For a room of 15m², there can be up to 10 tenants that live in it together. The sanitation conditions in these places are deprived, old and severely degraded. Most of workers' accommodation are old one-story houses. The average area per person is less than 3m², especially in some places, this number is just over 1m². Of all workers who have to rent a room for accommodation, there are 60.3% that are living in cramped and inconvenient spaces which lack a lot of amenities, including a set of table and chairs for receiving guests.

In Ho Chi Minh City, there are rooms of about 15 - 20m² but have to accommodate 10 to 12, even 15 people at a time. These cramped, shabby and uncomfortable rooms surrounding industrial parks and export processing zones remain the main shelter for tens of thousands of workers. Most of these places are of low quality, since they are located in an unsanitary environment due to flooding or garbage pollution. It can be said that housing for workers is a very pressing pressure that need a timely, consistent and responsible solution as well as strong, resolute and synchronized measures from the government of all levels.

Along with housing, the recreational life of workers also has many shortcomings. According to survey results, 90% of workers at industrial parks and export processing zones are currently living in concentrated boarding houses. All activities tend to take place in a closed community with less exchange and contact with the larger environment outside. The stress from long work hours and high work intensity, plus a closed and distant lifestyle have greatly hindered workers from accessing to and enjoying recreational activities.

A survey of 383 workers at Trang Bang and Linh Trung Industrial Parks in Tay Ninh Province shows that only 66% of them watch TV (most through the TV set at their boarding house). Meanwhile, 73% of them don't listen to radio; 71.02% have no books or newspapers to read; 95% have no access to entertainment performances, including non-professional ones; nearly 97% don't watch movies in the cinema or outdoors; 91.7% don't

^{vi} <https://doanhnhansaigon.vn/nha-dat/nha-o-cho-cong-nhan-thieu-tram-trong-1094614.html>

have access to entertainment programs of mobile troupes; and 90% have no access to sports activities.

From this fact, it can be seen that the poor recreational life of workers is caused by: long work hours and high work intensity; poor and outdated facilities; tedious and boring recreational activities which are not appealing and lively enough to attract workers; local governments, enterprises and sociopolitical organizations have not paid adequate attention to the issue and have yet mass movements that are strong enough to entice workers into cultural and recreational activities, etc.

It can be said that the poor recreational life of workers is deforming human values in the education of a new generation of workers as owners of the country, and significantly affects the quality of life and motivation for development.

6. Work and life of female workers

Most of industrial parks and export processing zones in the South are where 70-90% of female workers live and work. The great part of them are young and unmarried. Many factories have thousands of workers; however, male workers account for only 2-3%. Recent studies on gender among female workers at industrial parks and export processing zones show that, issues of love, marriage, childbirth, childcare, parenting, etc. are all really concerning.

Most female workers do not have time and conditions to communicate and find partners due to their intense workload and long work hours. If they do have time, they still have no place or environment to meet and learn about their partners. The lack of parks and recreational places as well as necessary community activities makes the need to contemplate beauty and express feelings strange for a part of female workers at industrial parks today. Regarding marriage and family, female workers at industrial parks and export processing zones are really pessimistic. Some are indifferent and emotionless, while others are hasty and materialistic. The outcomes of this shabby environment are abortion and urgent marriages due to premarital pregnancy, leading to immature and economically insufficient families which lack marriage knowledge and emotional maturity for a sustainable family, and ending with divorce due to unhappiness and the lack of conditions to strengthen and preserve family life. Children born to this type of family live in a difficult situation and poverty, and do not receive good medical care. Not every worker mother has enough money to go to the hospital for childbirth. Many children are born right in humid bedsits which lack the simple and necessary facilities. Most children have no access to vaccination and vitamin-taking every year. Children of workers just hang around the accommodation of their parents, and also lead the same isolated and inferior life that is separated from the social environment, just like their parents.

7. Solution

In order to build workers in general and workers at industrial parks and export processing zones in particular into the main force and the decisive factor for the success of industrialization and modernization, it is necessary to quickly set out and implement policies, regimes and solutions in a synchronous and systematic way in areas related to the material, recreational and mental life of workers. From the facts and findings of research on the life of workers at industrial parks and export processing zones in the Southern key economic zone, we would like to propose and suggest some of the following issues for discussion.

First: It is necessary to quickly organize the implementation of training and development of human resources. The State should soon promulgate the legal framework and policy system towards expanding and consistently implementing the policy of socialization in the field of human resource training. It is required to have appropriate and legally binding policies, so that each type of enterprise, based on the professional characteristics of its business, can organize training by itself or in collaboration with others. Enterprises must be proactive in making plans and exploiting all resources towards socialization to quickly train enough human resources with expertise to meet their development tasks, following a defined timeline. This should be seen as one of the strategic solutions. This solution ensures to help overcome the shortage of human resources in the immediate and long term for each enterprise. The State should have strong policies and measures to focus on training and cultivating teachers, providing technical means and legal foundations, forecasting development trends, focusing on training new professions for main and key sectors as well as for labor export. Clusters of school require to be planned according to sector group and region to coordinate and actively support enterprises to successfully achieve the goals of training. Resolution is needed to remedy the fact that vocational training establishments are both weak and lacking, as well as dispersed and ineffective.

Second: It is necessary to soon develop suitable legal contents and institutions on ensuring the lives of workers at industrial parks and export processing zones for each specific type of enterprise and local conditions. It is needed to review the planning of industrial parks and export processing zones to propose new regulations to these establishments, thus to ensure the appropriate ratio between factories, warehouses and environmental landscape, housing, medical stations, hospitals, schools, parks, facilities for sports, entertainment and suitable types of club, etc. The disproportion and inadequacy between industrial parks and export processing zones and essential social infrastructure are not recommended to be prolonged. It is time for the State to be resolute to assign specific tasks and responsibilities to the management of industrial parks and local authorities regarding this issue. A committee should be established to inspect and supervise the synchronous implementation of solutions to improve living standards, health care and education, including education and health care for children of workers.

Particularly, in the field of housing for workers, the State needs to promulgate specific policies. In the immediate future, it is necessary to plan and build models of condominium and houses with adequate capacity and utilities dedicated to each category of worker at industrial parks. Building accommodation for workers must be considered one of the prerequisites when constructing industrial parks and export processing zones. The State must set aside an appropriate land fund, adopt policies on land, taxes and capital incentives, mobilize all resources toward socialization, and bring workers, enterprises and local authorities at all levels together for the investment, construction and management of housing for workers.

The field of housing for workers is in desperate need of leverage policies and responsibilities of government at all levels. The fact that nearly 70% of workers have to live in shabby houses that lack minimum utilities at industrial parks and export processing zones is something that requires serious thinking, if not a big problem. Here, in order to deal with this situation, strong and synchronized solutions are required, first of all is the role of macro-management of the State through policies and institutions as well as necessary investment resources. Party organizations, local governments, management of industrial parks and export processing zones must take responsibility and actively propose and implement solutions to improve the situation. Industrial parks, export processing zones and enterprises that have done a good job of caring for workers' life should be used as examples to learn from in order to successfully build models to apply at other establishments.

There must be very specific regulations on the ratio between working time and relax time, forms of community activities, cultural and artistic movements, and contests on technical innovation initiatives, understanding of law, trade union regulations, home economics, love and marriage, etc. It means to organize movements and to have legal regulations, fair rewards and penalties in place. In addition to encouragement, there should be an inspection and monitoring regime, instead of leaving each enterprise and locality to take care of this work by themselves. Each enterprise and locality must consider the issue of organizing, taking care of and improving the life of workers a crucial task that is not inferior to the task of economic development.

Third: It is necessary to quickly reorganize and improve the political system and mass organizations in each enterprise as well as in each industrial cluster and industrial park. The particularly important issue that plays a decisive role is building Party organizations and cultivating Party members among workers at industrial parks and export processing zones. It can be considered the top priority to ensure leadership and implementation of policies and guidelines regarding workers of the Party and the State. Only when Party organizations are established and Party members are cultivated at enterprises can the Party and the State thoroughly understand the thoughts and real life of workers, thereby making reasonable decisions to improve the situation. On the other hand, such Party organizations and members will gather and encourage workers to follow the State's policies and help to educate them. However, in recent years, establishing Party organizations at enterprises, especially foreign-invested ones at

industrial parks and export processing zones have encountered many difficulties. In some enterprises, the owners are either suspicious or does not support the establishment of sociopolitical organizations among workers. In some others, there are no difficulties and obstacles from the owners, but the local Party committees don't pay enough attention and have yet positive solutions. Therefore, most enterprises in industrial parks and export processing zones are without Party organizations, the work of cultivating new Party members is also almost neglected.

There should be specific regulations for trade union organizations in industrial parks and export processing zones. The trade union must be the authentic organization and the communist school of workers. Trade union organizations are obliged to supervise all activities related to the interests of workers, play the role of the bridge between business owners and workers, monitor work and rest regimes, organize recreational activities, prevent all acts of abusing, increasing work intensity and prolonging work hours.

Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union and workers' youth organizations must be organized in accordance with the activities of each type of enterprise. Youth union organizations must assist young people to work and learn better; organize revolutionary movements, entertaining and recreational activities, technical improvement, productivity and product quality improvement; encourage young people to properly adhere to labor disciplines; educate industrial lifestyle and promote exemplary models. Social evils and culturally depraved products must be fought with and prevented by attractive, useful, appealing and inspiring community activities. In order to do this job well, organizations at higher levels play a decisive role.

The Women's Union is also an organization with irreplaceable role in the sociopolitical life of female workers. It must be an organization with the highest obligations and responsibilities to defend its members' interests. The responsibility to improve expertise as well as to raise sociopolitical awareness of female workers lies first with the Union. It must be a school to educate and disseminate knowledge of love and marriage, organization of family life, parenting, home economics, etc. In particular, it must defend and protect women from violence at home and at work. In short, the Women's Union must be a reliable institution to take care of the mental and material life of female workers, to help them in times of difficulty, and to create the best conditions for them to strive and fulfill their work as wives, mothers and skillful workers to the society.

A common problem for all sociopolitical organizations at enterprises is the method of organization and operation. To survive, these organizations must adapt to the living environment and specific working conditions at industrial parks and export processing zones, especially in enterprises where owners are foreigners. In modern industrial production lines, the work position of each worker is related to the whole system. Moreover, labor time is a condition to ensure profits for employers. Therefore, it is neither possible for organizations to have activities during work hours, nor to have any support in terms of facilities and other conditions from business owners. Furthermore, workers

are subjected to high work intensity, work in shifts and have non-concentrated accommodation, so it is also difficult to gather them for collective activities. All of these issues require local authorities to timely sum up practical experience and creatively apply general principles to have positive solutions and flexible methods. On the other hand, the State needs to study and include in the law the right and protection of the right of workers in establishing and participating in sociopolitical organizations. Only then, organizations of the Party, trade union, youth union and women's union at enterprises in industrial parks and export processing zones can develop and contribute to the cultivation of workers.

The above work is of the entire Party and the whole political system, but first and foremost is the direct responsibility of grassroots Party organizations at industrial parks and export processing zones as well as the Party committees of localities with industrial parks and export processing zones. The central issue is to strive for all types of enterprises to have a grassroots Party organization, and for these organizations to truly lead and ensure the implementation of directives and resolutions of the Party as well as laws of the State and protect the interests of workers.

8. Recommendations

In order to well care for the mental and material life of workers, Party committees at all levels need to thoroughly and creatively apply the six basic contents and orientations in the resolution of the National Assembly's 10th session on cultivating workers in the new situation:

- Develop in terms of quantity, quality and organization; improve revolutionary enlightenment and political standing, education and professional qualification, to be worthy of being the leading force in the industrialization and modernization of the country.
- Create jobs, minimize the number of workers without a job or unemployed.
- Well implement policies and laws on employment, salary, social insurance, health insurance, unemployment insurance, occupational protection, rehabilitation and health care for workers; have housing incentive policies for high-level workers.
- Establish organizations, cultivate trade union members across business establishments and economic sectors.
- Regularly take care of material and mental life, protect legitimate and legal rights of workers and employees, and pay attention to workers in large urban area.

9. Conclusion

In general, not every aspect of a worker's life is problematic. Many enterprises have really shown their responsibilities to workers. They have been paying attention to training, lunchtime, health care, social insurance, reward and penalty regime, as well as establishing trade union organizations and encouraging entertainment and recreations.

Many are very aware of the fact that workers are an important resource and precious assets, thus are having many effective and practical policies in place to take care of workers. Despite all this, the positives and upsides are not yet common.

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