

India Threatens 'vulnerable Workers'

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MUMBAI: Efforts by the Indian government to boost manufacturing and encourage startups may put vulnerable workers at greater risk, say activists, amid pressure from investors to smooth the path of doing business.

The "Make in India" week kicks off on Saturday, aimed at luring greater investment to increase output and create more jobs in industries including electronics manufacture and textiles and apparel.

A separate effort to boost startups exempts them from some inspections and taxes for at least three years.

"There's already a lot of pressure to amend existing laws to make it easier to fire workers or prevent them from unionising," said Gayatri Singh, a co-founder of the Human Rights Law Network in Mumbai.

"It's dangerous to exempt businesses even more. There are large numbers of child workers and bonded labourers; without checks and balances, we won't know what's going on."

India is regarded a low-cost manufacturing hub for industries ranging from autos to textiles. Protection for workers is lax and legislation poorly implemented.

Millions of workers contend with archaic labour laws and are confined to the so-called informal sector, with poor training and few benefits in businesses that often flout laws concerning safety or the employment of underage workers.

There are 5.7 million child workers in India between the ages of five and 17, out of 168 million globally, according to the International Labour Organisation.

More than a quarter of them work in manufacturing, confined to poorly lit, barely ventilated rooms embroidering clothes, weaving carpets or making matchsticks. Even adult workers are not protected.

Almost half the world's enslaved workers, or about 16 million, are in India, many working in poorly regulated industries such as brick kilns or small textile units.

In the automotive industry, which has drawn large global brands including Honda Motor and Suzuki Motor, more than 1,000 workers, most below 23 years of age, are injured seriously in the automotive hub of Gurgaon and Manesar in northern India alone every year, according to a report by non-profit organisations Agrasar and Safe in India.

"Most enterprises remain in the informal sector for fear of compliance with the laws and this is bad for labour because they get no benefits," said Prashant Narang, an advocate at the Centre for Civil Society in New Delhi. "The policy should be to simplify labour laws and promote formalisation of the economy."