

**Global garment chains, local labour activism:  
new challenges to trade unionism in the Tirupur industrial cluster,  
South India**

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The recent phasing out of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement has enhanced global competition and is leading to a spread of garment production across the globe. Intensified price competition and flexible production regimes are placing downward pressures on labour costs and working conditions, while at the same time global retailers invest in codes of conduct and global labour standards in an attempt to curb the most exploitative working conditions in supply firms. What happens to labour and its organisation in the face of the new threats posed by global capital? Who is 'representing' labour today and what is the leverage of different groups speaking 'on behalf of' labour?

Based on an ethnography of labour politics in the Tirupur garment cluster in Tamilnadu, South India, the paper explores the state of local trade union activism and its ability to address new challenges to traditional labour politics generated by global value chains. It is argued that while local trade union activism remains a potentially powerful tool in workers' struggle for better pay and work, in Tirupur union membership is at an all time low and union leaders are reluctant to change their style of trade unionism. This may potentially undermine their very *raison d'être* and shift labour representation away from unions towards NGOs and even employers themselves.