

Swiss National Newspaper «**WOZ – die Wochenzeitung**» Nr. 44/2014 on sale all over Switzerland from 30.10. – 05.11.2014

By Dominik Gross (Text) and Karin Scheidegger (Photography and Translation)

Link to original article:

<https://www.woz.ch/1444/portraet/der-hund-ist-teurer-als-der-arbeiter>

## «**THE DOG IS MORE EXPENSIVE THAN THE WORKER**»

Indian union activist Rajkumar Sahu has been fighting for 23 years for the acknowledgement of rights for contract workers of a cement plant of Swiss multinational Holcim in the Indian State of Chhattisgarh. Now he has come to pay a visit to Switzerland.

Union activist Rajkumar Sahu:  
«We are going to continue our struggle, not just for ourselves, but for those after us»

Strikingly good intentions always sound formidable; unfortunately they are seldom implemented. This applies also to the Swiss cement company Holcim. We learn from Holcim's website «Social responsibility is a cornerstone in our commitment to sustainable development. At Holcim we aim through investment and engagement to contribute to the communities in which we operate – based on mutual respect and trust.»

Indian welder Rajkumar Sahu raises a weary smile on these phrases. For 25 years he has been working as contract worker in a factory of Indian cement supplier ACC Ltd in Jamul. As of 2005 the factory has been taken over by Holcim.



### Sixteen dead and a little holiday

«In front of the limestone mines there is a watchdog that costs the company INR 15'000 monthly (CHF 230). The warden who walks the dog, however, only gets INR 5000 (CHF 79) monthly» says Sahu. For 23 years he has been fighting as activist of the progressive cement workers union *Pragatisheel Cement Shramik Sangh (PCSS)* for equal treatment of contract workers and permanent workers of ACC and Ambuja Cement, which has also been taken over by Holcim nine years ago.

PCSS and vice-president Sahu have reached quite a few things in the course of their struggle: some holidays, safety equipment for hazardous work, proper pay-slips and time cards as confirmation of the work performed.

The price is high: In 1991 sixteen activists were killed in clashes with security staff and since PCSS's inception in 1989 numerous union activists have lost their jobs.

Nevertheless, Rajkumar Sahu and his comrades never consider giving up: Still today, the contract workers at ACC in Jamul earn for exactly the same work where a permanent employee would earn CHF 280 (INR 17'000) monthly, only CHF 100 (INR 6300). According to PCSS numerous contract workers at Holcim-ACC perform up to 250 hours of un-paid extra time annually, while access to health care and company-schools remain unreachable.

Holcims take over of ACC and Ambuja has not changed much for the precarious situation of the contract workers – in contrary: Rajkumar Sahu's situation has become worse under the roof of Swiss Holcim. Eight random lawsuits have been framed on his name since 2005. Each one brings a lot of bother and loss of pay. At times, Sahu had to spend full working days at the police station, only for getting a simple signature on a form. One time when he was handing out leaflets of the union, he got himself two lawsuits in one day. They were issued in two different places that are too far away from each other in order for Rajkumar Sahu to break the law in two different places in the very same day.

Discrimination of contract workers at Holcim contradicts the Indian Worker's Laws. In the year 2000 the State Government of Chhattisgarh delegated the conflict between PCSS, ACC and Ambuja to a labour court. As of 2006 PCSS' claim has been approved by two tribunals and in both instances Holcim took the case further to an even higher body. After 14 years of struggle, the case is only one authority away from the Supreme Court in New Delhi. However, still a long time may pass until the highest court of India is going to look into the case.

This week, Sahu had been sitting in an Indian restaurant in Bern, together with his colleagues Lakhan Sahu and Shalini Gera. The PCSS delegation had come to Switzerland for a mediation meeting at the OECD Contact Point of the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO). In 2012, PCSS had filed a complaint against Holcim on the grounds of mistreatment of OECD-regulations for multinational corporations. The outcome of the confidential mediation is expected in November. Sahu does not seem assured. Even if PCSS would win this complaint: also SECO is not in a position to do more than imposing good intentions into the direction of Holcim. «Nevertheless» says Rajkumar Sahu «we continue our struggle, not just for us, but for those that are going to follow after us. We don't have any other choice.»

## Cast system instead of apartheid

Holcim is not willing to speak to WOZ in regards of PCSS' allegations, but they mentioned that they were in a constructive but confidential dialogue with the relevant unions. Very constructive and confidential was also once Holcims dialogue with the apartheid regime of South Africa. Then, the company was still called Holderbank and its apartheid understanding directors were Max (father) and Thomas (son) Schmidheiny. Unlike the apartheid in South Africa, the cast system in India is still determining. Most contract workers at Holcim are from the lowest casts. People deprived of their rights make good value workers. Wherever they are available, Holcim likes to produce its cement, for more than hundred years.