

asian workers organising

december 2010



Women Workers Lead

On 31 July and 1 August 2010 the inaugural meeting of Women Workers Lead was held in Jakarta.

Participants in the first WWL meeting came from Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Australia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Holland. They came together because of their passion and commitment towards supporting women's leadership in independent and democratic trade unions.

Their experience in working on the issue of women and trade unions, in trade unions and labour organizations together with men activists saw many advances for women but it fell far short of what was possible.

As a result they felt that it was important to work on a project that is exclusively devoted to the issues of women workers leading in trade unions. The experience of the activists present saw the possibilities of working with women workers in many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. This project intends to work with these contacts wherever possible on the issue of women's leadership in trade unions.

Women workers in trade unions

In the global workforce women are over-represented in precarious and low-skilled jobs, and they are paid on average 20% less than men. The great majority of workers in the informal economy, in export processing zones or in domestic work are women who make up nearly 70% of the world's poor and 65% of the world's illiterate.

In unionised sectors the position of women is much better. For example the wage gap for women unionists is 11% - not 20%.

Despite a general reduction in the total of trade union membership, women members are constantly growing and therefore clearly showing that for trade unions attracting more women to their ranks is playing a crucial role in maintaining trade union growth.

Women are 45% of all union members.

Asia, Africa and parts of Latin America constitute major production hubs for industries. Among these are female dominated industries like garments/textiles, electronics/electrical. The organising rate in these industries, in these parts of the world, are very low.

In fact these industries are anti-union and they have over several decades devised and used union-busting strategies successfully.

At the same time there have many successful organizing strategies which should be shared across the regions. The myth propagated by employers is that women workers will resist trade union organizing. Yet the experience in the Free Trade Zones from Latin America and Asia is that the employers have failed in keeping trade unions out of their factories. Yet these stories are little known and WWL consider that it is important to share these experiences with women workers as widely as possible.

Women's leadership in unions

In terms of trade union leadership, the presence of women remains very limited. ETUC surveys show that the number of women presidents (4 out of 42) has worsened since the previous year when 6 Presidents were recorded.

As for the number of women who are General Secretary (8 out of 39) no significant changes have to be observed with respect of the previous year's survey, when 7 female General Secretaries were reported in total.

The survey shows that the level of female representation in ETUC affiliates' decision making bodies is lagging behind. This is the main rule, with some exceptions in the Nordic unions.

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Only a limited number of organisations have a number of female delegates in their General Council which reflects or is close to their trade union female membership. The same situation is observed in the composition of trade unions' Executive and Steering Committees. The situation seems to be more critical in some Southern and Central Eastern Europe confederations where a percentage comprised between 0% - 10% of women seating in decision making bodies has been registered.

WWL organising strategies

The project is to be open to all women workers irrespective of sectors. This will enable work to be done in a more free and dynamic way without the restrictions that some unions have.

This project will provide an unfettered space for women as the project will work exclusively for and with women workers.

This project will have from the onset a global focus and perspective. This is in reaction to the current global supply chains that use women's labour extensively.

This project will actively seek to link women workers through their leaders and activists across countries to inform and learn from each other; think, analyse and discuss together; plan, strategise and work together.

WWL intends to develop solidarity links along the industrial supply chain, to increase the union members' industrial strength in disputes.

Another WWL strategy is to develop training for women activists in unions, such as basic union organising, gender training, production mapping, occupational health & safety, supply chain mapping, negotiating skills, campaigning and communication skills.

The proposed strategies include international exchanges and the opportunity to be placed with other women organisers in unions and learn from them as they participate in their regular union activities.

Another strategy is to use networking as an industrial organising tool: Developing lines of communication within the same industry, organising exposure and exchange visits particularly focusing on organizers who

are all working for the same company, or as suppliers for the same brand, in different countries.

WWL also agreed that it is useful to provide support in learning English because it is used regularly in international negotiations. However it is also important to develop training materials in multiple languages and in highly visual styles such as cartoons. Important materials would include kits on campaigns for a living wage and for occupational health & safety campaigns.

Communication methods should also be highly visual, like short films showing the experiences of workers on the job and in struggle. These materials are more easily shared and discussed.

Principles

WWL discussed and adopted the Global Labour Movement Charter as a basic document to facilitate discussion on common demands and keep focus. WWL will ensure that this charter is a living document, to be developed and amended by the network and as new members join the network. In particular WWL will propose some amendments focused on gender issues and women's perspectives.

It was decided that membership is open to individuals and to organisations that agree with the aims and processes of WWL. Individual membership is restricted to women. Organisational membership is open to organisations that promote gender equality and women leadership in trade unions.

Some principles were also adopted to guide WWL as an organisation. These were:

- collectivity in decision-making and functioning;
- democratic structures with accountability and information sharing;
- being a space for all participants and partners to learn, share and build their skills;
- aspiring towards diversity, gender equality and empowerment; and
- being firmly based within the working class.

WWL activities are currently based in the Asia Pacific region, but its intention is to become global with the inclusion of members in Africa and Latin America.

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Global Labour Movement Charter Workshop

Presented by AAWL at the Latin America Forum - Melbourne October 2010



What is the Global Labour Movement Charter?

The Global Labour Movement Charter is a document that was originally developed at the Latin America & Asia Pacific International Solidarity Conference in October 2007 in Melbourne. It has since been amended through collective discussion at other international meetings with many genuine labour movement organisations, in the Asia Pacific region and globally. The Global Labour Movement Charter is a series of demands aiming to develop a global labour movement platform to help genuine labour movement organisations coordinate their campaigns and improve their organising strategies.

We have national campaigns; Why a global charter?

Capitalist have a global reach through their companies. Capitalists place production where it is cheapest - that is where the relevant skilled workers have the lowest wages and conditions, and where governments assist companies with infrastructure and financial incentives. To keep production costs down, capitalists and governments introduce anti-union laws and repress genuine unions in the production zones. These are some of the factors taken into account by capitalists when deciding where their companies will establish production. If workers manage to organise in one country, and improve their wages and conditions, this will make production more costly. Capitalists will re-evaluate their costs and profits, and may shift production to another area where labour costs are cheaper. Sometimes capitalists find it easier to shift workers instead of shifting production, so they request governments to establish a temporary migrant workforce with few rights in order to continue profitable production.

What we need to recognise is that there is a global labour market, and that industrial campaigns and

agreements at a national level are now inadequate to protect workers' living standards because jobs and even workforces can be shifted.

So what can workers do?

Workers in each industry can protect themselves against this capitalist strategy if they coordinate their wages and conditions demands in all production zones, and support each other when attempts are made to reduce wages or conditions anywhere. This would make it unprofitable for companies to relocate production or relocate workforces.

But how can that be achieved?

To achieve the highest wages and conditions workers organise genuine unions in all countries. Organising efforts by newly established genuine unions in unorganised industries need to be assisted by already established genuine unions, in the same country and in other countries. Genuine unions internationally will then be able to develop campaigns and struggles to achieve enforceable international agreements that improve wages and conditions for workers in all countries.

Isn't that utopian?

This is now necessary in the current economy. There are international union agreements already, the most well known are the agreements for international seafarers. There are a number of companies that have production and sales in more than 100 countries. Toyota, Nestle and Unilever are the best known, but there are many others. They are harsh union-busting companies, but many of their workplaces in many countries are organised by genuine militant unions. There are campaigns and solidarity campaigns taking place. Many industries, like finance, transport, vehicle manufacturing, food manufacturing and distribution, or communication are part of a global production chain across many companies. Industrial action at one point has immediate effects throughout the world.

What is required is a common understanding of the needs of workers, and more communication and more coordination to achieve our demands.

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So what's next?

To develop these plans, genuine labour movement activists working in the same industry who agree with the concept of a Global Labour Movement Charter need to meet together to develop clear demands, aimed at particular companies, across particular industries or aimed at governments. We will need to develop campaigns and strategies and proposals for actions that will involve workers in different countries to put coordinated pressure on companies and force them to accept our demands and agree to enforceable global industrial agreements. To develop this discussion we will need a global labour movement meeting. Because travel is so expensive, we propose that initially regional meetings should take place, each to discuss the

concept and content of the Global Labour Movement Charter, and draw up proposals for campaigns and strategies to achieve our demands in each industry.

What can I do to support this?

The Global Labour Movement Charter is a proposal that does not belong to AAWL. It belongs to the genuine labour movement. We would like genuine unions to discuss this project, and promote it. We would like the concept of the Global Labour Movement Charter to be discussed at union meetings, particularly international labour movement meetings, and that organisations should begin to consider their ability to support hosting or participating in future regional labour movement meeting that will develop these plans.



Trade unions the best antidote against world poverty

Marsinah was a 23 year old Indonesian woman, who had dreams for a better life. One evening on the 8th of May 1993, on her way back home from work, she was set upon by unknown assailants and drowned in a canal. No one was ever tried for her murder, but it is accepted wisdom that Marsinah was killed due to her efforts in trying to increase the poor wages at her factory.

Unfortunately Marsinah's story is not an isolated one. According to the International Trade Union Confederation, 101 trade unionists were killed because of their workplace activities in 2009 alone. Most of these organisers were simply seeking better workplace conditions, so that they, and their families, could escape from poverty.

There have been many attempts over the last decades to address world poverty. The current Millennium Development Goals are but one of a long list of undertakings to eradicate world poverty. Poverty is an issue that still affects up to two billion people.

While poverty is often framed as a 'situation', it is actually a complex interaction of factors such as history, economics, politics and social conditions. Contrary to popular belief, poor people are not helpless, inactive subjects who are 'poor', but are actually individuals who, on a daily basis, attempt to overcome their economic condition by working in any job that they can get. This desperation gives rise to the so called informal economy where people work as labourers, recyclers, scavengers and so on.

The term 'informal' economy, as with the term poverty, is one that hides more than explains. It comes across as a neutral word implying flexibility and casualness for the people engaged in it. The reality could not be more different.

The extent of the informal economy in the world is huge. Workers engaged in it have minimal, if any, bargaining power with their employer, often employed at the end of a long chain of sub contractors. Individuals have to work in unsafe environments, for low pay, no job

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contract, no security and no benefits. It is a brutalising experience which forces people into a day to day scramble for survival. Sometimes, this is not enough.

The statistics, just on the issue of occupational health and safety (OHS), are horrendous. The International Labour Organisation estimates that around 2.3 million workers die every year due to workplace accidents and illnesses. More often than not, these workers represent a significant contributor to their family and community income. Their loss and/or incapacitation is a serious loss, and can mean the difference between people going to bed hungry or not.

Given the central role that employment plays in the life of poor people, it is surprising that the issue of workers rights and the role that trade unions can play, in lifting people out of poverty is often only mentioned in passing.

One of the most effective actions that could be taken to alleviate poverty for hundreds of millions of people would be the introduction of a living wage in each country, with an associated increase in OHS standards. This would almost overnight transform the lives for millions of people, their families, and their communities.

For example, just in the last few months, in one of the poorest countries in the world, we have witnessed one of the greatest poverty alleviating achievements of the last decade. In Bangladesh, garment workers, a predominantly female workforce, were being paid US \$25 a month. Even in Bangladesh, this wage kept workers and their families in abject poverty. Since July, a wave of work stoppages and strikes throughout the garment sector, involving millions of workers, has managed to lift the minimum wage to US \$43 a month. While this is only the first step, with workers seeking a living wage of US \$73 a month, this improvement will be enough to lift millions of Bangladeshi immediately out of poverty.

Given the context where poverty often seems so hard to eradicate, it is surprising to see how little publicity this issue has been given. Without overstating the significance of this event, even this partial wage increase, represents a historical achievement in improving the quality of life for millions for people in one of the poorest countries in the world.

It is for this reason that in every country you will find

people who are organising workers in order to win a living wage for them and their families. Unfortunately, instead of being hailed as anti poverty campaigners, these organisers face constant harassment and intimidation. Many end up beaten up, jailed and in some cases killed.

Who has heard of Diosdado Fortuna, a Filipino organiser shot dead in September of 2005 while organising workers at a Nestle plant? Or much more recently, this July, the Rindhawa brothers, gunned down in their union office in Faisalabad, Pakistan for organising garment workers?

While poverty is a dynamic and complex issue, it is also important not to frame poverty as the 'problem', but to see it more as a symptom of another issue. The actual problem, is the accumulation of wealth into the hands of a minority of people. According to a UN agency, the top 10% of people own around 85% of the world's wealth, leaving the majority of people literally scrambling for the crumbs.

Any serious attempt at overcoming the grinding poverty that affects millions of people around the world, needs to look at workplace issues such as wages and OHS. Campaigns need to target the right of workers to organise freely at their workplaces, for a living wage and for safe working conditions.

We owe this not only to the billions currently living a hand to mouth existence, but also to people like Marsinah who have died in the attempt to improve the lives of their fellow workers and their families. In the end, it is simply a question of justice.



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we need a global labour movement charter



The right of all workers to organise collectively without being subjected to violence, intimidation or legal harassment

The right to organise unions and take collective action including industrial action and solidarity actions

Secure employment

Health & Safety at work, compensation, rehabilitation

A living wage for all workers in all industries

Decent work, with appropriate hours of work proposed by workers, paid leave and paid holidays

Full rights for women workers

Indigenous workers' rights & Land Rights

Permanent residence with full employment rights for all refugees and all migrant workers in all countries

No child labour

Education, housing, health and childcare provisions

Social security and adequate welfare benefits

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