

# *Act now, don't delay*

**I** was born in Delhi and belong to a state in the hills called Himanchal Pradesh. My father was an executive engineer with the government. My mother is a housewife. I have one brother.

I went to Carmel Convent School and to Jesus and Mary College. I got an honours degree in history and then joined the airlines as an air hostess. I have been with the airlines for the last 13 years.

## **Comrade's death**

I joined the union after a women who I had worked with died. She was a tribal air hostess. India has a caste society. Our constitution says that 70% of jobs must go to the scheduled or tribal caste. I belong to an upper caste, and in the upper caste there is high competition to get a job.

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*'I take care of the hostesses cause - their working conditions, demands and problems.'*

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The woman who died belonged to the scheduled tribe - she died because of ignorance - because the company did not give her information. Our airline, which is in the public sector, provides free medical aid. This woman who died, did not know

*Neera Thakur, an air hostess and ACEU counsellor and cabin crew representative for the Northern Region, India, speaks to Tanya van Meelis.*

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that she could get free medical aid. She did not know her rights and perks in the company. When she died, we thought that her death occurred because of the company's lack of interest in the wellbeing of its employees - it was not informing individuals of their justified rights. Management was not forthcoming with the information. We just used to learn the information, by the by, as the years passed.

## **The union**

I joined the union five years ago after the death of the woman and seeing that the hostesses were disorganised. Hostesses had their own association - but it was not recognised by management. I joined a very old union which air hostesses had left because they felt that their interests weren't being protected.

My union, ACEU, covers all employees in the airline except engineers, pilots and management. It covers grades 1 to 9 - a sweeper would be grade 1 and a manager would be grade 9. It is a company union,

and is not affiliated to any federation. It has about 23 000 members.

## Union duties

I became active in the union as soon as I joined it. I had to fight for the company to pay for the transportation for the woman who had died to be buried. The doctors and the airline had been indifferent, so I had to take the issue up. She had been absent from work – the company never found out why, never found out that she was sick. It stopped paying her salary because she was absent. When she died she had only \$1.

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*'We fear that the new medical checkups will lead to harassment and dismissals of crew who are not 'medically fit'.'*

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I was elected regional counsellor in the union. This means that the entire North region is my responsibility. If an employee is disciplined, I take up their case. I take care of the hostesses cause – their working conditions, demands and problems. I liaise with management and discourage workers striking at the drop of a hat. This means that I am always very busy.

When I was elected, I was the only lady to hold office in the union in Northern India – a region which is larger than South Africa. I was also elected a member of the works committee. This is a committee which management has to set up to look into the welfare of employees and ensure that the labour law is being implemented. I have also been recruiting air hostesses to become members of the union – I tell them that it is better to be in a recognised

union than in an association that management won't recognise.

We have regional council meetings once every three months and once a year we have a general council meeting. All the regions come together in the general council meeting, and they make resolutions. We also have informal shopfloor meetings during lunch hour.

We have many elections – for example, we have elections for the works committee, the labour relations committee and the thrift and credit society. The thrift and credit society is like a bank for union employees.

## Major problems

One major problem that we are facing now is that management decided to send us all for thorough medical examinations. This includes X-rays and ultra-sounds. When we joined we were told that we would have to have a medical checkup, but that it would only include our height and your weight. We fear that the new medical checkups will lead to harassment and dismissals of crew who are not 'medically fit'. These tests can be misused.

Another problem is the discrimination of women. Women make up the majority of the flying crew, but male persers are allowed to pick and choose the flights that they go on. There are only a few male persers, but the advantages they get show that it is still a man's world. We used to be paid no matter how many hours we flew – so the men used to choose to do short flights, and the women would do the long flights, but get paid the same. We fought this and now we get paid for how many hours we fly.

We are also very worried about privatisation. We fear that management will become more strict about working hours. At the moment, we have to fly a maximum of 11 hours per day. We are



scared that management will extend these hours. We are also concerned about job loss and whether permanent staff will be turned into casual workers.

### **A woman unionist**

I don't think that it's a problem being a woman in the union. The only thing is that I'm not invited to late evening meetings, because of the constraints of being a woman. But I do not think there is a problem of being sidelined. I'm given important positions and things to handle. I belong to the higher strata in the organisation. But, you need to be educated to be a unionist.

### **Political affiliation**

My union is not affiliated to a political party. If you are affiliated to a political party it can dictate to you what you should or shouldn't do. We all have political affiliations as individuals, but we took the position that the union should not have a political affiliation.

### **Sigtur**

I think that the Sigtur conference is a very important conference. We must implement the decisions we take. Saying things does not mean that we will take them up. We must take up issues at an urgent level. We must address issues at shopstewards level, because our very existence is being affected by the issues we are



discussing at the conference. We should have this conference every six months so that we can keep working on the issues.

We should engage in massive active resistance to threats to the labour movement. This shouldn't be delayed. We also shouldn't get into a parochial attitude where we judge people by their education, income etc. We should set aside pride and everything else, look beyond colour, caste and other affiliations. We need to think and act on a common platform.' ★