

Building internationalism

one NGO's role

Solidarity and internationalism are not only the preserve of trade unions. NGOs also do their part to foster solidarity and promote internationalism. They work across boundaries and identify common challenges that unions in different countries face. NGOs can help these unions share resources and experiences and even come up with common responses.

An example is the AMRC. Based in Hong Kong, it is an independent, regional NGO that focuses on Asian labour concerns. Its main goal is to support democratic and independent labour movements in Asia. The AMRC upholds the principles of workers' empowerment and gender consciousness, and follows a participatory framework to achieve its goal.

The AMRC focuses on EPZs, as many new ones have been established in Asia since the mid-1970s. May Wong, its project co-ordinator, explains: 'Most of our research focuses on EPZs in southern China. The industries in the zones are normally light industries such as textiles, shoes, toys and electrical goods. We are familiar with EPZs since they are a common issue in Asia.' For Selma Hayati, AMRC's documentation officer, studying EPZs allows one 'to see the workers' struggles against capitalism'.

Asian EPZ study

In 1994 and 1995 the AMRC ran a two year project covering ten Asian Countries (South Korea, China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Indonesia,

Etienne Vlok details how the Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC) is building labour internationalism through its work on EPZs in Asia.

Thailand, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Hong Kong). The project - 'Women Workers in Asian EPZs' - culminated in a book published in 1998 - 'We in the Zone: Women Workers in Asia's EPZs'.

According to Bong Angeles, the AMRC's communications officer, the book provides the background of EPZs in the different countries and discusses trade unions' difficulties and struggles in the EPZs. It also highlights the key issues affecting EPZ workers, especially women, and analyses these in the context of countries' export-oriented development strategies and current global trends.

AMRC published the book 'to provide detailed reference for labour and women advocates to enrich their knowledge about EPZs and women workers around the region'. Angeles adds: 'The information would serve as a guideline on commonalities and differences between different EPZs. Also on how to organise in EPZs.' Hayati hopes that the different countries will feed the information back to the workers.

The book aims to exchange information

on EPZs and establish contact between groups. The AMRC has partners all over Asia.

Wong explains: 'Our partners differ: in the Philippines it is the Workers' Centre and in Sri Lanka it is the trade unions. It will either be an NGO or a trade union. In China we do not have trade union partners. Our network there is through researchers or cadres of the Hong Kong union. It cannot be done in the name of the Hong Kong union as it is not allowed to operate in China as a union.'

Single, young and healthy

AMRC's research revealed that most of the production in EPZs is done by subcontractors or suppliers for Transnational Corporations (TNCs). Wong says that these companies employ workers with the same characteristics - young, healthy, single women from rural areas. Wong continues: 'They are recruited because they work so hard and are more submissive than men. In a Samsung factory where I conducted interviews, the manager told me that they employed so many women because they are easier to control.'

Hayati attributes the women's age to the fact that they have less experience: 'In Indonesia, older women have too much experience of companies' policies so when a woman turns 25 she is fired. That is why they prefer younger, inexperienced women.'

Organising in EPZs

EPZs are synonymous with abuses, low wages and long hours. But why do trade unions not organise workers in these zones? Angeles stresses that it is not easy to organise workers in EPZs in Asia. 'In some countries there are national labour laws which guarantee freedom of association but the EPZs have different

laws which prohibit trade unions and strikes. An example of this is the Philippines where they have an EPZ administrator who deals with problems in EPZ factories. Labour problems do not go to the Department of Labour.'

Wong cites some more examples: 'In Thailand unions organise in EPZs, but the employers victimise the union members. In some cases they even dismiss them. Unions have the right to organise but the employers stop them. In China the situation is even worse because of the All Chinese Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). It is a yellow union - a puppet of the government. In the state-owned enterprises the trade unions are present but they are ACFTU-affiliated. The companies in the EPZs are usually set up by foreign investors so they are privately owned. Because unions have to affiliate to the ACFTU to be recognised, many unions who choose to be independent are thus prevented from organising in the EPZs.'

Latin American exchange

The AMRC's main focus is in Asia but it is trying to build partnerships and improve solidarity and internationalism with other regions. One country it has managed to do this with is Mexico. This partnership started when it hosted a Mexican intern for a year. The intern introduced the centre to Mexican unionists. This is how its other project on EPZs started.

Angeles says that the centre has just concluded an exchange with Latin American women workers who visited Asia. The exchange programme, held in July and titled 'Learning from our common struggles', was held for women workers and organisers of EPZs from Asia and Latin America.

According to the *Asian Labour Update*, women from Mexico, El Salvador, Dominican Republic, Sri Lanka,



The AMRC attended the Sigtur conference in Johannesburg as observers.

Philippines, Korea and Hong Kong held a workshop to exchange information on and experiences in EPZs. They also looked at the situation of workers in EPZs and how to continue linkage and solidarity.

The Latin American workers were in Asia for two weeks. They first went to Korea for an exposure programme for four days. There they met the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), the Korean Women Workers Association, the Korean House for International Solidarity and other labour NGOs. They also visited a garment factory and looked at labour standards and codes of conduct in Korea.

The programme focused on Korea since Korean capital is growing in many Latin American countries. According to the *Asian Labour Update* 'Korean capitalists have a reputation for bad working conditions in EPZ factories and keep

violating labour and environmental laws'. This programme helped establish channels to exchange information and build solidarity on Korean capital.

After visiting Korea, the EPZ women organisers from Asia and Latin America convened in Hong Kong. They met with NGOs like the Hong Kong Women Workers Association and the Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee. While in China, the group visited a garment factory in Guangdong province, and joined a group of migrant women workers at Macau's labour department in support of their struggle.

The women workers and organisers shared their experiences of EPZs. AMRC documented these experiences to show the similarities and differences between EPZs in different countries. This allowed the delegates to learn from and teach each other.

Some reports from delegates on the Latin American exchange

Korea

Korea was among the first industrialised countries to set up EPZs and free trade zones (FTZs) in Asia. Many women workers in these zones now experience worse conditions than in the seventies. Workers in Korea have struggled for improved working conditions for more than 20 years, yet conditions are now returning to what they were when their struggle started.

This is because managers are using tactics to reduce salaries, reduce full-time workers and increase part-time workers. Thus women's salaries are less than half of what they were two or three years ago.

The Philippines

The Workers' Assistance Centre (WAC) is an NGO servicing workers in the EPZs in Cavite province. Cavite hosts the Philippines' biggest EPZ with 200 factories employing 50 000 workers. Most of the factories operating here are involved in the labour-intensive manufacturing of low value-added goods such as electronic parts, semi-conductors, apparel and travel bags. Japanese, Korean and Taiwanese capital mostly invest in these companies. All these companies act as local subsidiaries or sub-contractors of TNCs.

Similar to other EPZs, workers here face low wages, long hours, insufficient or lack of social benefits, job insecurity and capitalist and government bias against unions. The WAC started organising in 1995 and has formed eleven unions already. Recently, the first ever demonstration by 500 workers took place in the Cavite EPZ. After that, workers organised a strike against illegal dismissals in a garment factory in the zone.

The WAC is organising women workers through the Solidarity of Cavite Workers, an organisation which full-time and casual workers can join. As unions are not allowed in EPZs, the organisation establishes groups in factories. The WAC did a study on the working conditions of the workers in Cavite EPZ in 1997. It found that the respondents complained of the usual symptoms such as recurring headaches, back pain, failing eyesight, recurring coughs, stress and skin allergies. Other workers had developed pulmonary diseases, tuberculosis, urinary tract infections and ulcers.

Miscarriages were also common.

Dominican Republic

Here the Maquilas – another name for FTZs or EPZs in Latin America – are bordered by unbreakable fences or walls. FTZs were launched in 1983 and have grown quickly. The growth can be explained by the government's fiscal and tax incentives. Today the country has 42 FTZs where 496 companies operate and 200 000 workers are employed. The FTZs are either privately administrated (59%), publicly administrated (36%) or mixed (5%). Only seven recognised unions exist. Investment comes from the US, Taiwan, Korea and Britain.

The Centre for Participation Research and Female Action found that many women who worked in the EPZs were previously activists. However, when they start working in the EPZ they would lose contact with everything. One reason is that they are exhausted: they work long hours in the factory and then go home for their second shift. The centre is concerned because in the union movement nothing is said about women's double shift. About 60% of EPZ workers have children; about half the EPZ workers are heads of families.

Mexico

In the early 1990s the Maquila industries grew rapidly, especially along the US border. Wages in the Maquilas do not cover the cost of living, so a family needs several wage earners – according to recent studies, a Mexican family needs seven minimum wages to satisfy basic nutritional needs.

Working conditions in the Maquilas are very difficult. Protection for handling chemicals like lead and other dangerous substances do not exist. This is in addition to the exploitation that is part of working in a Maquila.

The Maquiladora Women Workers' Network has been working to form local groups as a prelude to forming independent unions. The network also encourages current unions to fight for workers' rights. It tries to mobilise workers in the Maquilas to demand a living wage, the right to a job and, most importantly, the right to organise. While workers have a constitutional right to organise, they do not have the right to have an autonomous union in the Maquilas.



AMRC delegates (centre).

Issues that were common to many EPZs were the fact that the women worked in poor working conditions, and that many of their working conditions were eroded over time. For example, delegates reported that a worker in China's Special Economic Zones would have earned 1 000 Yuan a month ten years ago, but now has to make do with 400 Yuan per month.

Not only were working conditions declining, but jobs were also being lost in some EPZs. For example, factories relocated from Hong Kong to China, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Vietnam.

The women found that it was very difficult to organise unions in the different EPZs - both because of the law, and because the women workers themselves were exhausted from their long working hours. The reports also highlighted how different union-supporting organisations were able to support workers in different EPZs.

NGOs' role

In the near future the AMRC will visit Mexico to organise the second leg of the exchange - the visit by Asian women workers to Latin America. Angeles believes that the first leg was successful as it formed the platform for future work and relationships. Not only will this improve solidarity between the continents but, according to Wong, it will also improve solidarity within Latin America where an alliance does not exist. The AMRC's website declares that workers will only become truly empowered if international solidarity is strengthened. By building bridges between different countries and continents, the AMRC is showing what NGOs can do to strengthen international solidarity and empower workers. ★

References

Asian Labour Update 31, May-August 1999
AMRC website: www.bk.super.net/~amrc