

Freedom of Association Project

Myanmar



Starting from scratch: education is the key

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Points of Interest

- Over 400 enterprise unions have been formed to date
- 17 employer organisations formed so far.
- Federation of Trade Unions of Burma (FTUB) leaders allowed to return to organise unions.
- The project is undertaking 15 training days of workshops this month.
- Strong support for the project from Labour Ministry, the central business organisation ...and workers of course.

Three months into the US State Department funded FOA project the programme is really gaining traction. With the number of unions growing daily there is a lot of education work to do.

This has been helped by an initial 3 months (from July 2012) of ILO HQ funded awareness raising and relationship building activity.

The key programme at present is a 2 day bipartite workshop. 24 union leaders focus on leadership, communication, strategic thinking and negotiation skills on the first day. On the second day they are joined by their employers. This day is spent on relationship building through joint learning

about their legal rights and responsibilities, with collective bargaining role play and workplace health and safety exercises.

It is 50 years since freedom of association was a legal right and the workshops begin with a degree of caution from both union leaders and employers. Invariably, by the end of the second day, there has been a noticeable shift in attitudes and understanding. The evaluation feedback from both workers and employers has



One of our first bi-partite workshops

been very positive.

The bi-partite workshop is currently being run weekly. A decision was made that these workshops should be in Myanmar language and led by local educators. The next challenge is to develop more educators to increase our capacity.

The challenges

Apart from the scale of the education work needed with new union leaders, employers and government officials, a continuing concern has been dismissals of workers for union activity.

The Arbitration Council has ordered reinstatement but several employers have ignored the orders. The Ministry of Labour is moving to change the law to include penalties, including imprisonment, on em-

ployers who fail to comply.

Despite the chilling effect of dismissals on union membership, the workers are showing an impressive determination to continue exercising their rights.

International Labour Organisation

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The Freedom of Association Project in Myanmar was established after the 2012 International Labour Conference sanctioned this work to support the Myanmar Government's Labour Organisation Law, which introduced freedom of association rights after 50 years, came into effect in April 2012. Funding from the US Department of State for the 12 months from September 2012 is gratefully acknowledged.

The initial small FOA team of two in July last year has now increased to five. Subject to additional funding it is hoped to increase the staff to seven or eight. And yes we will try to address the gender imbalance!

Over the next few weeks of this newsletter we will introduce each of the staff members, along with other stories about our work. We hope you will continue to take an interest.



The Freedom of Association Project team. From left: Zaw Naing Htun (translator), Moonlight Pan Po (educator), Ross Wilson (project leader), Moe Min Thaw (project assistant) and Zaw Lynn Oo (driver).

Workshop prompts health and safety focus in factory

Impressive changes to workplace health and safety have been made by one Yangon factory. Immediately after an ILO workshop attended by union leaders and their employers from Korea Link Industrial, the two groups have worked together to identify and remove hazards in their workplace.

The boiler has been screened off from the lunch room, fire exits have been highlighted, and shelving arranged to allow for safe storage of lunch boxes.



Together they are now considering ways to reduce the presence of mosquitoes and dragonflies in the lunch area.

Korea Link aims to be the number one factory in Myanmar and it has made a very good start. There is a very active la-

bour organisation with 200 members and a seven member executive. They say they can discuss issues daily with managers, a key to the successful working of the labour laws.



Union leaders Nay Myo Aung (R) and Aye Min Soe flanked by managers Aye Mya Mya Khaing and Tin Tin Ni (R)