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Non-verbatim notes on ITUC-AP and ATUC leaders’ conversation on women and youth participation in trade unions at the Project Assembly and Launching

25-26 July 2019, Bangkok, Thailand

The project conducted a baseline survey among ITUC-AP and ATUC affiliates in Southeast Asia in February-April 2019. The study indicated the status of women and youth participation in ASEAN unions. It establishes a starting point against which the ITUC-AP/DGB BW will measure the progress and impact of the project. The results were presented to the ITUC-AP and ATUC affiliates in July 2019 in Bangkok, triggering an interesting discussion on why this low participation, what could be done to get to the future of work unions want.

ATUC GS Ruben noted: “There is no more evidence of low participation than in this assembly, where there are few young, few women [participants: 4 young women, 5 older women, 19 old men]” Continuing: “Workers want careers, they want to be promoted, they want good lives. On the other hand, companies are looking for workers with leadership qualities. That’s why this dilemma – young unionists who have to support a family with their jobs and from union work. In many unions, dues cannot support unions and expenses. How can we compete with companies and retain promising young men and women?”
Low participation begins in plant level leadership. “Chairs of plant level unions are mostly men, that’s why lack of women involvement. Women are not part of leadership. This is reflected in contents of collective agreements, too.” Sulistri says there has been progress through the years: “women participation has risen; then some youth.” - A woman leader

Young workers don’t know about work conditions. They are not confident enough. That’s why they don’t go for union leadership. That’s why “Our youth chair is not young anymore.” [He’s 43.]

Vilay, Laos: Mekong is in similar situation. Women participation is improving. “Not yet with youth who are more concerned with salary than workers’ rights. Youth are inexperienced, too. They need to build confidence to accept leadership.”

Zito, Timor Leste: Women get married early, and they are burdened by dual responsibilities in family and company. That gets in the way of their union work.

Thavee, Thailand: Many women when they get married give up work and unions. Youth have low capacity; their understanding of labor issues needs to be raised. Idris, Indonesia: says there are problems of culture and political will of ruling class.

ATUC DGS Cedric asks: Why do old unionists stay? Why do women, young workers stay in unions, despite this? He hopes this question could be asked in national, federation, and local activities.

Sulistri: What’s the interest, need of youth, to join unions? Apprenticeship, more quality employment, how to get information on jobs. “Different strategy? Perhaps use technology, better services.”

What can be done

Chou, Cambodia: We need to build capacity in leadership. Strong local unions make for strong federations. When women and youth are promoted to leadership, then good performance. Young men and women could be powerful in organizing. Then the natural course – organizers become leaders, they outlive older leaders. They should be engaged in collective bargaining (CB). True, not all will continue work for unions, but for some time, we will have them with us and we would have contributed to their development. They need English training, too. A young woman leader: “but expose, encourage, trusting them [youth] to lead.”
On union sustainability, **ATUC President Halim** chimes in: “Unions should be competitive [for people] with companies. The union brand should be one of continuity. To get this, unions need to do consistent, continuous training.” **Maung Maung, CTUM Myanmar:** “Unions need programs and projects for income generation, the Singapore example. [Our people] need social security, for being workers, and for being unionists.”

**GS Ruben:** There might be potential from the informal economy. The informal ‘taxes’ informals pay for the ‘privilege’ of vending, operating, could be shifted to union dues, etc.

**Sunday, Cambodia:** Where are the youth? What are they doing? This must be documented. Unions must develop data base of woman and youth in the workplace. “There should be a policy on the young, when they grow old?”

**SNTUC** cautions not to be so obsessed with numbers:

- Most important – leaders should be active in local constituency
- Trust has to be earned. There are many opportunities at all levels. We must be collaborative, not confrontational.
- Workers must be adaptable, flexible.
- Unions should be as a lighthouse: future-ready. We adopt to change.

**ATUC DGS:** Unions work in many areas with limited resources. There are too many priorities among already-reduced list of priorities. Union activities need to be planned carefully.

**Sulistri** reminds: “Don’t forget to send results [of meetings, seminars] to people, so they become part of the conversation, not just the participants themselves.”

All interventions point precisely to the need for the ITUC-AP/DGB BW Project. All interventions, suggestions, would back, support, strengthen implementation of the project.

Participants were reminded, and they agreed, that women/youth representation should be priority among unions for increased representation to be reached.

All agreed that there is a need for continuing discussion of (1) the root, sources, causes of low representation, as well as the difficulties, challenges, in union operations; (2) the needs of unions and unionists, capacity building, how to attract women and young workers, how to maintain union activists; (3) how to yield to those who don’t feel old, how senior persons could contribute more to the unions without discouraging young persons.

Caveat: The Secretariat apologizes for any misinterpretation in English usage of participants which could lead to our wrong understanding of contributions to the discussion.
Women and youth together for leadership takes off

21-25 October 2019, Nonthaburi, Thailand

Some 32 women and youth participants from nine countries in Southeast Asia are taking off from Thailand where they spent five intensive days of high-level training aimed at strengthening their leadership capacities.

The program, a result of 10-month preparations - from analyzing the baseline information, developing the training manual, pilot testing the materials, readying the training team - provided practical tools, know-how, and training to help them thrive as leaders in the trade union environment and elsewhere.

Tailored around their specific leadership capacity building needs and challenges, the training covered a range of key issues such as:

- Trade unionism and me
- Our national economies and how they affect conditions of work and life
- Our world of work
- Women and youth are all in this together on gender equality
- Trade union leadership
- Educating unionists, stakeholders and other allies

Through a wide-range of highly participatory and interactive training methods, the participants went through a rigorous schedule of sessions, group exercises, role-plays, audio-visual presentations, small and large group discussions, and personal reflections from real-life situations. Their collective experiences and challenges that had held them back from realizing their full potential featured prominently in the discussions and debates.

It was not all fun and games for the trainees as the five-day program also translated into intensive sessions on personal development, leadership and working together.
Through a mapping exercise, participants outlined initial actions for advancing the training messages in their own organisations. Their plans will serve as starting points for the development of national strategic plans to scale up solution-oriented and women/youth-driven actions.

What else is in store for our leaders in training? They will draw on their newly-found knowledge and skills to drive positive change. They will participate in and lead national project activities. They will be part of national steering structures.

They will complete the second part of the training. Watch their journey; more is coming soon.

**Background**

The training was the first in a two-stage program supported by DGB-Bildungswerk in the first ever collaboration between ITUC-AP and DGB BW in a Southeast Asian-wide initiative to build women and youth leadership in trade unions. The second stage will be held in early 2020.

The participants represented a diverse range of women and youth across Southeast Asia – Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Timor Leste, Thailand, Vietnam - involving 15 affiliates of ITUC-AP and Asean Trade Union Council (ATUC).
Feature Story:
From golf caddy to trade union leader

Sunday was born to a humble family outside the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh, on the best day of the week, Sunday, in 1986.

Those days, after the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement, the French offered boys, rather than girls, opportunities to be further educated. Girls were clearly marginalized and, on completing their education, were expected to take factory jobs.

One day in 2003, Sunday’s parents, selling raw rice and small snacks, went bankrupt after being cheated by their business partners. They had ten children, and those who could work were forced to find jobs so that they could help support the family. Their schooling was disrupted.

Sunday recalls how many of her friends were able to secure jobs in the factories but there was nothing for her. She took the only other option, a caddy at Cambodia Golf and Country Club. She was pleasantly surprised to find that being a caddy was not as scary as she first thought. “I love this job,” she says today, “If I had ended up in the factories, I’d be sitting all the time and it would not be as healthy for me. Here I can breathe fresh air as my job is fully outdoors.”

Thus, while she dragged golf bags around the course for high ranking government officials, businessmen and celebrities, Sunday learned much about different cultures and broadened her knowledge on political, social and economic matters. Undeterred by others, she spent early mornings before work and afternoons after work studying and improving her English, in order she said to move ahead in her job and to make a difference.
The workplace was rife with verbal abuse and sexual harassment of female staff members. Often, golfers would be intoxicated and try to have their way with the female workers. Staff were reported for trivial things if they resisted advances or stood up for their rights. Management stressed that “The customer is king”, even suspending the girls, which spelled no income and dire difficulties for their struggling families at home.

Sunday recalls that a union was organized in 2006 and 2007, raising expectations of a ‘voice’, and possibly improved working conditions. She tried to play an active role, but was rebuffed, reminded that she was too young and inexperienced to become a senior union member. Sunday continued her education, attending workshops and meetings where she learned the core activities of a union leader.

“I wanted to prove the pessimists wrong,” she says. “I wanted them to see I am not just a girl working at the golf course. I am much more than that; I know myself and my abilities. My parents raised me to be independent, and I knew that I needed to strive to be smarter in order to help my colleagues.”

Instead of getting better, things got worse for the women. They were suffering. They turned to a new union assisting factory workers in the garment industry. At end 2012, a union called ‘Workers Democratic Union of Cambodia Golf and Country Club’ was started. Sunday was elected leader and mobilized the workers to defend themselves and their rights.

Once certified in 2013, they filed a suit against the company, claiming unfair treatment, salary infringements and harassment. The Taiwanese managers running the golf course knew Sunday and her English, and were wary. She was threatened, intimidated by some senior Khmer staff and high-ranking officials, even suggesting links to the political opposition.

In 2018, the President of the Cambodian Labour Confederation (CLC) nominated her to the ATUC (ASEAN Trade Union Council) Youth and Women Committee (YWC) where she was elected co-chair. She represented ATUC in several ASEAN programs. She is part of the ITUC-AP/DGB BW Project Supervision Committee representing ATUC YWC. In March 2019, Sunday was appointed Treasurer during the Congress of CLC.

She participated in a DGB BW Partners Conference on Trade Education in Düsseldorf, Germany, in October 2019. Part of the learning she brought back was how rapidly new technologies are changing the world of work and how reskilling and up-skilling of young union members was vital to the union movement.

Says Sunday: “I have proven the critics wrong. I have learned how to improve working conditions for women and youth in my travels to Asia and Europe. I have something valuable to share. I have learned so much more than I ever expected on this journey. I want to continue to learn new things and to challenge myself to become stronger as I strive to promote equality.”

Sunday’s heartfelt message is:

“Step out of yourself, go further, be bigger than you have ever been.”

Sunday would be an excellent example for the project’s trained people - confident, engaging, forward-looking, always learning. She has come a long way from the frail, shy, silent Sunday.