



NEWYs2GO

(Newly Empowered Women Youth So Together)

ITUC-AP/DGB BW Project "Strengthening Women and Youth Leadership within the Trade Union Movement For Decent Work in Southeast Asia (2019-2021)"

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Photo by United Nations COVID-19 Response

Special Edition: The Band of Women and Youth Representatives

Dogged, unrelenting, fighting for their own, or others at large, belying their age – the WYRs in action in COVID-19.

They started training before the pandemic - a bunch of enthusiastic young women and men. They completed their drilling in Bali as COVID intensified, unaware of the coming deluge.

The pandemic was their baptism of fire, the challenge to their preparations, and resolve. They plunged into action immediately.

They were impressive. Juggling time, scrounging for resources, while caring for their families, co-workers and communities. Struggling, to care for themselves and for others, including a global campaign to free their leader.

Their activities range from the benign to the sublime: All in the shadow of COVID. With the all-present risk of infection. They are unlike others; they are unionists, and leaders in name and in deed. They believe they are the 'invincible' generation. Much was expected of them, and they delivered.

Raising funds; gathering supplies - food, masks, personal protection; packing them; distributing relief. Scrambling to service members losing their job temporarily, or worse permanently. Raising money for relief or tracking that assistance gets to where they should be. For devastated workers, months without jobs, without incomes, some longer than others. Then scrambling again to service members fortunate enough to get back to work. Making sure workers and members are protected on the way to work, at work and on their way home. While also working with others, helping communities.

To better understand the contribution of WYRs, their activities and interventions are summarized here. Details, presented in clusters of progressive action, are given under their names in no particular order.



What collective bargaining can do (All advocacy actions start at the enterprise.)

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Intan is a regional office chair of one of the federations under KSPI (Indonesia) where she works full time. The vibrant young woman was elected to the position in August 2019. She turned 31 in February this year. She bargained with employers to provide proper PPEs, face masks and hand sanitisers or alcohol to workers who were required to work. She received 2,700 food packages which her federation regional office distributed to affected workers.



Pipin is the chair of KSPI women committee since February 2017. She is a member of the women's committee of the electronics workers federation. She participated in negotiation with management in protecting some 600 workers (70% women, 50% young) in the electronics factory where she works. The company agreed to provide face masks and hand sanitizer for all workers, regular communication to exchange information, periodic disinfection of the factory.

Sandar Soe, 26 years old, chair of the CTUM youth committee, an ex-officio member of the CTUM governing body (GB), and in charge of the database department, collects relevant economic data and statistics to help CTUM unions negotiate with companies and their tripartite representatives to engage social partners in more effective social dialogue.





Swe Swe Khaing was re-elected chair of the CTUM women committee (WC) and ex-officio membership in the CTUM GB in 2019. A member of the basic/local union executive committee in the garments factory where she works, she helped her company implement COVID-19 preventive measures and negotiated financial support for affected (women) workers and transportation and accommodation in hostels.



Phea, 32 years old, is vice president of his hotel union with CLC located in a popular tourist area in Cambodia. The union and the hotel agreed to reduce working days to one or two days per week until 25 September 2020. The hotel laid off workers – those who got alternative jobs first. Phan Phea and the union negotiated for the retention of 15 union members based on first in last out principle. Out of 15, five unionists were laid off together with another 35 workers.

With 'free' time, Phan Phea has taken more responsibilities in his federation: running meetings, managing its social media pages, and giving information about COVID-19. He has mentored four women, two young women, in the CLC union women network in their province to develop their leadership potential.



Michelle, 34 years old, is a lawyer by profession and a legal counsel of FFW (Philippines).

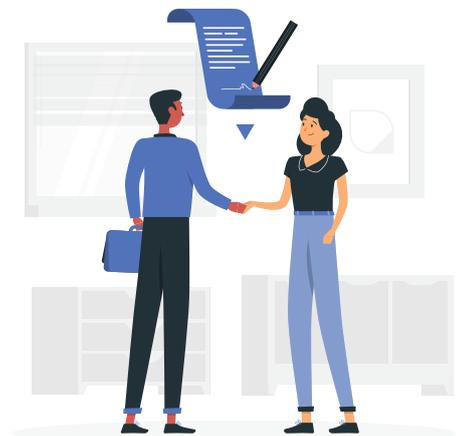
Michelle helped two local unions negotiate and conclude their CBAs. The CBA with a company producing paper products was signed in January 2020 after labour ministry mediation. The CBA with a company producing detergents and cleaning agents was signed in March 2020 after bipartite negotiations. Her support resulted in higher wage increases and educational assistance to family members of union members and additional allowances, leaves, and provisions improving labour-management relations.

She assisted four unions in negotiating safety and benefits during the lockdown. Two companies producing paper products and medicines agreed to additional leaves for members, instead of no work no pay. A pharmaceutical company agreed to provide transport service for members to ensure safety, A company employing medical representatives agreed not to diminish members' benefits.

Joanna, 33 years old, is chair of the youth committee of an FFW local union. She was elected as member of the board (governing body) of her local union in January 2020. She works in a telecommunications company, an essential establishment.

The union adopted Joanna's proposal to use an instant messaging app in their consultations as governing body members are in different regions nationwide. The union negotiated the provision of service cars to those with driver's license, meals for all employees, shuttle service for commuting members, teams to alternate working onsite and other safety measures. The company agreed.

For non-union members, Joanna proposed paying salaries to all workers regardless of status, including vendor (contractor) employees, utility workers and security guards during the lockdown, since the company would still receive revenues for providing telecom service including in online learning. The company agreed to the proposal covering more than 1,000 workers in more than 200 stores nationwide.





Rem is regional chair of the NTUC Phl women committee. She is a teacher in a state university and an officer in the state university's local union. Her new assignments include: reviewing the local union collective negotiation agreement (CNA) for additional benefits for the faculty and non-teachers and those concerning w/y for 2021; focal point for labour migration; and national centre representative in a tripartite council addressing migrant workers' concerns.

Rem participated in COVID-19 related negotiations with the university and adoption of early salary relief and emergency loans for union members; union decision-making on providing financial support to part-time faculty members and non-teaching personnel; providing mental health and counselling services outside the campus in coordination with the local government unit; and preparing proposals for the new normal in teaching courses.



Banpot, 33 years old, in the executive committee of the state railway union in Thailand, participated in negotiation with the company which agreed to protect both workers and commuters with proper distancing and provided cargo train drivers proper equipment, face masks, and rooms for breaks and resting.

Pavee, 28 years old, chair of the SERC youth committee and his local union's, participated in union discussions where it was agreed to reduce electricity rate as the government requested. The management also agreed to the reduction.



Aek, 35 years old, chair of a local union under LCT, participated in negotiations where the advertising company where he works agreed to prioritize the rehiring, after operations have normalized, of 400 subcontracted workers who were earlier dismissed and returned to their agencies because of the pandemic.



Suhaina, 25 years old, is a member of a beverage local union under MTUC. She took part in preparations to negotiate with management about allowances to workers required to work during the lockdown. Management gave RM50/worker/day during phase 1 and RM200/worker/day during phase 2 of the lockdown. She participated in resolving the issue of drivers caught by surveillance video link to Singapore HQ having meals without social distancing. As no proper information on social distancing was provided by management, the drivers were merely given a warning.

Amirul, 31 years old, was re-elected branch treasurer of a public bank union federation under MTUC (Malaysia) in April 2020. He negotiated with managers of five banks (each with 10-20 members) and settled members grievances, including compliance with safety concerns such as wearing face masks while at work and payment of incentives to members.



VGCL's Puong Kieu (Vietnam) assisted in negotiations with employers where payment of at least 70% of wages of workers laid off workers due to Covid-19 was agreed.

Carla, 27 years old, was appointed interim KSTL (Timor Leste) 1st vice secretary general for the women commission. She helped resolve payment of wages and benefits according to law and regulations.



Photo by Jaime Lopes on Unsplash

If the employer balks, on to the labour ministry or elsewhere ...
(If no results in the company, there are other venues to get resolution, or promises.)

Freddy, 35 years old, and the other KSBSI WYRs persuaded their leaders to create the youth committee, of which Freddie was elected the first chair in December 2019, thereby becoming an ex-officio member of the KSBSI governing body. He is in charge of programs in a branch office of his federation.

COVID-19 closed three tire manufacturing companies (not including Freddie's), displacing 2,300 workers. Freddy helped negotiate the payment of workers' wages and benefits. The companies disagreed and the union decided, with Freddy's participation, to go to the provincial labour department for resolution. With the intervention of the labour department, the companies signed a joint agreement to pay workers in stages, forestalling a scheduled strike.

Freddy engaged BJPS and got food packages and masks for 100 young people.

Feni, 30 years old, works full time in her transport workers' federation where she is the treasurer since April 2012. She is a member of the newly created KSBSI youth committee.

Feni was among those involved in bipartite negotiation in behalf of 600 drivers working for a plantation company which produces palm oil, rubber, tea and cocoa in three regions. The company refused to pay religious allowance and to allow the drivers to resume their work with safety precautions. The federation decided to raise the issue to relevant ministries through their tripartite representatives.

At the transportation ministry, Feni and the federation representatives appealed for relief goods for the drivers and to allow them to go back to work with social distancing and safety measures. The transportation ministry gave the drivers the permit to resume transporting goods for the company. At the labour ministry, they raised the non-payment of religious allowance. The company eventually paid 60% of the allowance; the rest to be paid until December 2020.

Feni was member of the advocacy and lobby team for the federation's 1,200 ride-hailing Grab drivers whose cars were repossessed when they failed to pay their car loans. Grab refused to return them even after the drivers had filed a police report for the forcible seizure of their cars. The federation held a protest rally at the Grab office, and requested the manpower ministry to mediate the dispute. The ministry first met the parties on 4 August 2020. It will continue to mediate the case and ordered Grab to participate in the mediation.





Chenda is CLC vice president (reserved for a woman), chair of the CLC gender committee, an activist in a federation of garment workers' unions. COVID-19 devastated garment factories with CLC unions: seven closed down, more than ten suspended operations, affecting 30,000 union members.

She negotiated with companies to pay workers what are due them from regulations, such as payment of 60% of salary, seniority indemnity (similar to separation benefits). The companies refused to pay seniority compensation. The companies and the labour ministry did not pay their share (\$30 and \$40 respectively) of the additional financial support for workers. Heng Chenda insisted workers need the payment at this time, pressed the labour ministry for solutions, and got pledges that these benefits will be paid in 2021.

negotiation

Chan, 24 years old, is a member of the CLC youth committee and treasurer of the local union in a transport company which served the airport in a popular tourist area in Cambodia. The transport company suspended its operations abruptly, and 200 workers, mostly men drivers, lost their jobs. Chan took part in negotiation for payment of workers' benefits, such as seniority indemnity pay and financial support to workers in the tourism sector, based on regulations. The company rejected union demands.

The union will go to the labour ministry, which will resolve matters after hearing the workers and the company. The labour ministry will invite Chan as a union representative in the consultation with workers.



Makara, president of a CCTU local union since 2011, has seen the pandemic close down her factory due to absence of orders, displacing 1,400 women (and 100 mostly men machinists). She negotiated the payment of their wages and benefits, including seniority indemnity pay, as required by law. When the factory refused, she brought the issue to the labour ministry which ordered the factory to pay the seniority indemnity and for the workers' last month's work. She has coordinated with other factories to find jobs for her now jobless co-workers, managing to place 60% of them as of this writing.



Social dialogue for regulations

(Tripartite dialogue can get things done,
or consider possible solutions.)

With **Intan** in the lead, her federation's branch engaged BJPS (social security organization), the provincial health and manpower departments to help protect workers and union members.



Photo by Chris Montgomery on Unsplash



At BJPS, **Intan** raised and confirmed that BJPS would facilitate the payment of health and pension benefits for affected union members based on a Memorandum of Understanding between BJPS and her federation. At the provincial health department, she pushed for socialization (dissemination) of disinfecting vehicles used by workers. At the provincial manpower department, she organized a social dialogue and demonstration for the issuance of a regulation on the payment of religious allowance and termination benefits to workers.

Sri is the secretary of the KSBSI Equality Commission (EC) since June 2019, and her federation's vice general secretary. She is a lawyer by profession. With such multiple responsibilities, she helped obtain information on benefits and food for BJPS dismissed workers. At the labour ministry, she was able to clarify that workers will receive the religious allowance in instalments until Dec 2020.

At the KSBSI Equality Commission, Sri helped develop a position paper on ILO Convention 190 on violence and harassment which was submitted to the labour ministry. She supported the decision to hold a survey on the effect of COVID-19 on women workers for a position paper in this area.



While COVID-19 raged, the Indonesian government tried to pass the Omnibus Law, integrating labour law with other laws and which threatens workers' rights and benefits supposedly to encourage investments. The **WYRs** participated in their federations' decision to support their confederations in parliamentary discussions. The confederations presented a united stand rejecting the proposed bill.



With inputs from Heng **Chenda**, CLC proposed the payment of 60% salary and giving additional financial support to workers which the labour ministry approved for the garment and tourism sectors. CLC also asked for temporary suspension of loan payments of workers to banks and micro finance services during the pandemic which has not been decided.

To minimize COVID-19 infections, Chenda proposed collective awareness-raising on COVID-19 at the factory level in a tripartite meeting. The social partners agreed: the labour ministry and unions would produce information materials; factories would provide soap gels and other protection items for workers.

Michelle's responsibilities now include representing FFW in tripartite meetings and as an ad-hoc consultant on women's rights and welfare. She participated in online tripartite meetings on the issuance of a COVID-19 advisory and on banning health professionals for foreign employment.



Migrant workers



Rem participated as NTUC PhI representative in the 18 June 2020 meeting of the tripartite council on migrant workers' concerns. Repatriation of remains of or stranded Filipino migrant workers, returnees who are in quarantine facilities, procedure for returning them to the provinces, financial support for overseas workers, and contact person for migrant worker concerns topped the agenda.

VGCL WYRs **Hung** and **Loi** both contributed to social dialogues by preparing statistics and documents for VGCL meetings with the Prime Minister (31 May 2020), Ministry of Labour (monthly meetings), Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (22 June 2020) Ministry of Health (10 July 2020), about improving the healthcare system to better protect workers' health and promoting cooperation to support Covid-19 affected workers and enterprises. They participated in disseminating information on occupational safety and health at the workplace during Covid-19.



Carla negotiated the adoption of COVID-19 safety precautions (face masks, hand sanitizer, social distancing) in a tripartite meeting. She also negotiated with companies to protect workers from dengue, which had 90 cases, against one case of COVID-19, at that time. She contributed to the issuance of a government directive providing subsidy for electricity and \$200 financial support per family (in addition to 60% of a worker's salary and 40% of a manager's salary) for two months.

At times, unions need to insist on compliance with law and regulations.

(Unlike in better times, regulations are not self-implementing.)

Intan, Chenda, Chan, Makara and Carla all had to assert workers' rights to get employers (sometimes, Government) to comply with regulations or tripartite agreements. **Freddie's** union had to threaten a strike. At BJPS, **Intan** raised and confirmed that BJPS would facilitate the payment of health and pension benefits for affected union members based on a Memorandum of Understanding between BJPS and her federation.



WORKERS UNITE

Or doing other things ...

(Unions and their [women and young] leaders are good at other, non-usual issues, too.)

On joint proposal from **Freddie, Feni, Sri**, the KSBSI w/y committees put up a hotline to receive information from union members affected by COVID-19.



Photo by Tim Marshall on Unsplash

Sandar Soe maintains a database of returning Myanmar migrant workers and their skills, information which has helped CTUM advocate for better job facilitation, reskilling and retraining services for returnees who lost their jobs because of the pandemic.

Moliny Yin, 20 years old, is the Facebook face of the Cambodian campaign for the release of Rong Chhun (who was arrested for alleged incitement to commit felony arising from his advocacy on border land) and four others who were arrested for leading rallies demanding Chhun's release.

Bunnarith Em, 36 years old, assistant to the CCU president, president of one CCU federation, now coordinates CCU bilateral projects with other organizations. CCU, through Bunnarith, proposed a government regulation declaring one of Cambodia's islands a protected area in a cycling tour as part of CCU youth's environmental campaign.



Meow, member of the TTUC women committee, has participated in CBA negotiation where her textile union proposes financial support for women who give birth.

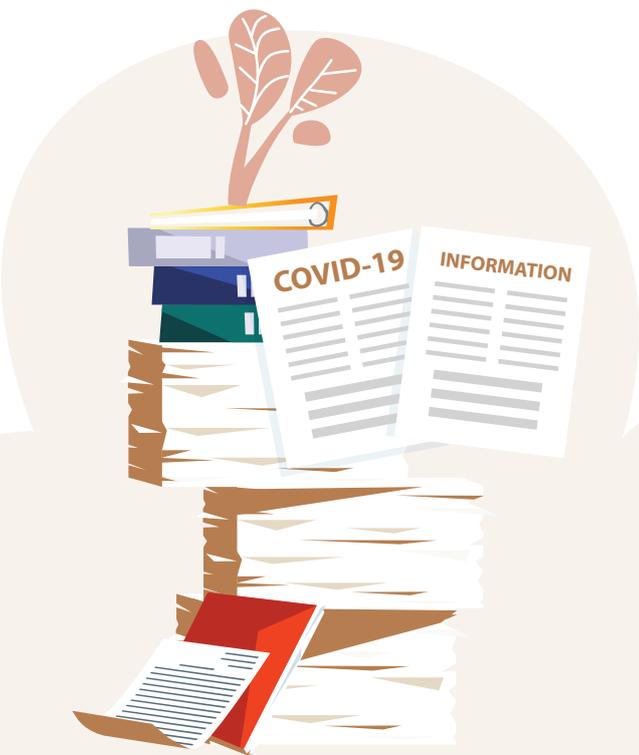
Bam, 35 years old, president of a SERC state enterprise union, is a member of a committee preparing proposals for the rehabilitation of the Thai national flag carrier.



Banpot and **Bam** are part of the committee which prepared a 10-point proposal on COVID-19 to the government.

Aek prepared infographics on COVID-19 and precautionary measures.

Carla's KSTL opened a hotline which has received complaints from terminated workers from various companies.



The WYRs, they feel sad for those who lost their jobs. Those workers who will not be going back to work, those garment workers in Cambodia, Indonesia and Myanmar. They have not gone back to work, those garment workers in Philippines and elsewhere.

Scant consolation that these poor workers would be less exposed to COVID, but would now be terribly victimised by hunger and poverty.

Sadder still for those without unions - with little support for what to do, where to get help, where food would come from next, who will represent them in their grievances, who will help get compensation from shuttered factories.

Really sad for the world.



Photo by Gaelle Marcel on Unsplash

Nothing, not even the pandemic...

Our WYRs toil on, regardless their organizations are burdened by COVID-restricted operations. While their members struggle under no-work no pay, with State assistance scandalously not even meeting daily requirements, with no union dues to cover operations expanded by COVID-19. Workers forced to accept payments meant for some other time and contingency. Workers dipping on savings (if they have), or going (deeper) into debt.

The tragedy of continuing tragedy. In some countries, contained COVID but uncontained economic reverses, continuing misery and poverty. In others, continuing COVID, raging community infection - continued dislocation.

Heroically, our WYRs toil on, working on with determination. Anxious as gains in wages and benefits and standards from years of struggle are erased. Like Sisyphus in Greek mythology, having displeased Zeus, condemned to roll a boulder up a steep hill, and the boulder relentlessly rolling back when it nears the top. Like life starting from the beginning, every time, as in 'Fifty First Dates'.

COVID-19 was made for them, it seems. With challenges on top of those their guiding leaders used to face, navigating gingerly, masked or otherwise, on cycles or on foot, on scary filled public transport, while trying to fix, or chisel away, the flawed visible socio-economic systems and challenging structures.

They, we, know what to do, if need be. For the WYRs appreciate, it is on them, on us, workers organizations, to fight these scourges of inequality and injustice, COVID or post-COVID.

Rage, rage, keep up the fight!

