

Solidarity

Workers in New Zealand helping workers overseas

Photo credit: Meena Kadri

The Newsletter of the Unions Aotearoa International Development Trust

Issue Four, Autumn 2011

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First skills training classroom already built

Building of our skills training centre for Burmese migrant workers in Mae Sot is well underway. The first classroom has been built and training has already begun.

Just before Christmas UnionAID received the exciting news that funding for the occupational training centre has been granted under the government's new Sustainable Development Fund. This will enable us to proceed with phase 2 of the project in March.

By mid year the project buildings will include two classroom/workshops, an office, and accommodation for both staff and trainees. With our total funding of \$NZ56,000, our project partner, the Federation of Trade Unions of Burma (FTUB) will build the complex of buildings, pay three staff, and provide food



and accommodation for the staff and 350 trainees for a full year.

These trainees are mainly young Burmese migrant women who will learn industrial knitting and sewing and will move on to work in the hundreds of clothing factories which have been established along the Thai-Burma border to take advantage of the cheap labour.

While many of these factories are sweatshops, the FTUB see this employment as a far better option than being forced into prostitution in Bangkok or trafficked off to other Asian cities.

The other part of the UnionAID – FTUB project is organising to improve working conditions in the factories.

Thanks to fundraisers

Over \$20,000 was raised last year through various fundraising events both in Wellington and around the country. Thanks to all those who helped organise and to those who attended the events and donated generously. This year we plan to have at least two film screenings in the capital as well as a fundraising dinner at Maranui cafe in Lyall Bay. It would be great to get events happening in other centres so if you can help organise please contact rossw@nzctu.org.nz



Become a Kiwi Solidarity member - Support real change

You can help vulnerable workers in developing countries in our region get a fairer deal by making a small monthly donation by direct debit by emailing unionaid@nzctu.org.nz with your contact details. We will then contact you and make the arrangements.

Unions Aotearoa International Development Trust is a registered charity - Reg. No. CC42051

Project priorities for 2011

UnionAID has established the following priorities for our project work in 2011:

1. The FTUB Mae Sot project

The establishment of the skills training centre for Burmese migrant workers is our first priority for the year. Funding from the Government's new Sustainable Development Fund will assist with this desperately needed facility.

2. The Tamil Nadu Labour Union project

Our existing 3 year project ends on 30 June 2011 and our strategy for this project is to work with our partners to develop:

- an economic development project which meets the Sustainable Development Fund criteria, based on the existing cooperatives, skills training and micro-enterprise work in the present project.
- a restructuring of the present union organising project so that it moves to self-funding, and to have a stronger focus on the inclusion of new Dalit

(untouchable) communities in Tamil Nadu. This project would be funded out of our Solidarity Member donations and fundraising.

3. A Pacific project

A UnionAID Pacific project, with a skills development focus, and possibly a health/education component will be developed if a suitable union partner, opportunity and need is identified.

4. Burma young community leaders project (BYLP)

The BYLP now has 12 alumni and 2011 will see the third intake of six young Burmese students. This programme, which is funded by NZAid, and delivered in conjunction with Victoria University, focuses on English language and development studies to prepare the students for increased responsibilities in their organisations both inside and outside Burma. We intend to build a network of interested organisations to provide ongoing support to the graduates from our programme.



UnionAID fundraising priorities for 2011

UnionAID has established the following priorities for fundraising in 2011:

Kiwi Solidarity Programme

We will continue with the priority of encouraging people to sign up to monthly direct debits as Kiwi Solidarity members. Our objective, consistent with union principles, is to get a lot of people giving small amounts, although large amounts are never refused!

A particular campaign will be to sign up union officials and staff. The CTU National Council has indicated support for this campaign and some unions are planning to establish a payroll deduction scheme with employer matching. Great news.

Other fundraising

Film screenings, and fundraising dinners.

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Notes from the field: Mae Sot



Kathryn Baldwin recently returned from working for six weeks as a volunteer with the UnionAID Project in Mae Sot. One of her strongest impressions was the lack of freedom or rights for the migrant workers from Burma. She is full of admiration for the commitment of the project leaders Min Lwin and Htwe Nge and the proactive nature of their work. Below she tells the story of visiting a typical factory and talking to one of the workers.

Kyaw, an ethnic Karen, arrived in Thailand seven years ago after working as a motorbike taxi driver in Burma. For the last four years he has been working at a knitting and sewing factory on the Thai Burma border.

Like many migrant workers Kyaw and many of his colleagues do not hold work permits. To prevent these illegal workers from being arrested or

deported back to Burma their employer bribes the Thai police. This 300 baht (\$13 NZ) per employee is deducted from the employees' wages.

The 200 workers get paid on the number of garments they produce. They typically make 12 garments each day which earns them a daily 150 baht (\$7 NZ). Workers are required to work 8 am till midnight with an hour off for lunch and another hour for dinner. They work 7 days a week but on Sundays they finish at 5pm.

Kyaw's working conditions are typical of the many migrant factory workers in Mae Sot. Many of them live on the factory site in overcrowded and appalling conditions. Part of the work the FTUB does is working with employees, like Kyaw, to provide them with skills and knowledge to enable them to advocate for their employment rights and in turn improve their working conditions.



Living conditions for factory workers: Kathryn Baldwin

Burma Border Study

Tour Jan/Feb 2012

UnionAid is planning a study tour to Mae Sot on the Thai-Burma border early next year.

As well as visiting our new Occupational Skills Training Centre the study tour will be a unique opportunity to talk to Burmese people on the border about their hopes and aspirations for a democratic Burma, to learn about international aid and development and the work of the FTUB and other groups fighting for a democratic Burma.

We will visit the schools run by the FTUB, the Prisoners Aid Programme and other NGOs working on the border. There will be plenty of time to talk to men and women unionists about their work, and the history of the struggle for independence and freedom.

The study tour is designed for people with a genuine interest in international aid and development, and the Burmese situation. We are looking for people who are active in their workplaces, who can bring enthusiasm to the study tour, and use the experience as an opportunity to learn, share and educate

when they return home. Solidarity members will get priority.

Expressions of interest welcome. Please email: rossw@nzctu.org.nz



Houses of the people who live near the dump: Kathryn Baldwin

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Comment



2011 is going to be the year when UnionAID really takes off. All the hard graft getting established, together with growing support from donors, has laid a strong foundation from which to build.

Just before Christmas we got the exciting news that our application to the Government's new Sustainable Development Fund (SDF)

to build a skills training centre for young Burmese migrant workers in Mae Sot had been approved. This project is incredibly good value for money.

The initiative is a tribute, in particular, to our project leader and FTUB partner in Mae Sot, Min Lwin who works relentlessly both inside and outside Burma to improve conditions for workers.

Elsewhere in the newsletter we have set out our priorities for 2011. They are ambitious, and challenging, for a small organisation of

volunteers. But with your support we can do it.

The SDF funding criteria encourages us to focus on economic development and the Tamil Nadu project already has components of this. The Dalit communities could benefit from developing the project's existing craft and contracting collectives, skills training and micro-financing. That will be our objective for their new project.

As a union based organisation, and with a network of Pacific unionists, we would also like to extend our work to our Pacific neighbours. There may be an opportunity to do that this year. And of course raising funds for all this has to be an important priority for us. Our objective is for all union members, and hopefully families and friends, to commit to a small monthly direct debit, perhaps \$10. This year we will have a special campaign to recruit union leaders and staff as Kiwi Solidarity members. Many have said to me that they intend to sign up, but for various reasons they don't get around to it. So this year we are making that a special campaign with May Day as D Day.

So it could be a big year for UnionAID. Please help us make sure it is.

Ross Wilson
Executive Chair
UnionAID

UnionAID 2010 Annual Report

Check out our website for our 2010 Annual Report. Our thanks to our auditors, Grant Thornton and Co, who do the UnionAID audit pro bono, and to Stephen Day for his design work.



Min Lwin and Burmese migrant workers

Yes

I want to become a Kiwi Solidarity Member

Name

Address

Phone

Email

Please contact me and sign me up as a Kiwi Solidarity Member to make a monthly donation.

Signature

Your regular donations mean that UnionAID can guarantee funding to our projects. It only takes a small amount each month to make a real difference to people's lives. Sign up for monthly donations now. Return the coupon to

UnionAID
P O Box 6689,
Wellington

or email the details above to:
unionaid@nzctu.org.nz



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