

Border/Line Health & Safety

NEWSLETTER OF THE MAQUILADORA HEALTH & SAFETY SUPPORT NETWORK

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Asian OHS Movement on the Upswing

The growth in size and sophistication of the grassroots workplace health and safety movement throughout Asia was evident in two important gatherings in China and Cambodia that our Network participated in this fall.

In China, the Suzhou University Law School hosted a meeting in August of academics and worker organizers from the electronics industry from a half-dozen countries including China, Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Asia is now the manufacturing center of electronics products globally and many of the occupational and environmental health hazards and diseases experienced by US semiconductor workers and their communities are now occurring in Asia.

The US delegation included Ted Smith of the International Campaign for Responsible Technology; Amanda Hawes, founder of the Santa Clara Committee for Occupational Safety and

Health; Miriam Lara-Meloy from the Berkeley-based Hesperian Foundation; and MHSSN coordinator Garrett Brown.

An organizational meeting following the formal conference proposed several goals: establishing a network of grassroots electronics worker organizations throughout Asia; launching an international campaign for improved working conditions in Asia's electronics factories; revising and updating the health and safety handbook for electronics workers published by the Hong Kong Asia Monitor Resource Center in 1985.

The overall objective is to develop an Asian, worker-focused network to increase the impact of campaigns generated by Europe- and US-based organizations like Good Electronics and the ICRT, and, first and foremost, to achieve actual improvements on the factory floor in Asia.

(See **Asia OHS Movement**, page 4)

Mexico at the Crossroads

Mexico is the country where our Network began its work in 1993 with grassroots organizations of workers, a few of them independent unions but most community, women's and human rights organizations, on the US-Mexico border.

There have been ups and downs for both our partners and our Network since then, but the current situation is dramatically worse in Mexico. The narco-war violence, where the narcos, the police and the military are all responsible for numerous civilian deaths and human rights violations, continues unabated, especially at the US-Mexico border. The US-initiated economic crisis has slammed working class Mexicans, and the Calderon administration has made matters worse with new taxes and social service cutbacks.

For Mexican workers, push came to shove on October 10th when president Calderon sent police and government agents into the headquarters and 100 substations of the Mexico City electric utility to disband the company and eliminate the Mexican Electrical Workers union (SME). Calderon's government went after the SME because it is one of the few independent unions whose 40,000 members have consistently opposed the government's austerity and militarization policies.

The Mexican government's action, in the wake of a three-year war on the Mexican Miners union (with which we have an ongoing project with at the Cananea copper mine in Sonora), is similar to President Ronald Reagan's firing of the PATCO air traffic controllers in 1981 and British Prime Minister

(See **Mexico at the Crossroads**, page 5)

Letter from the Coordinator

Neil Kearney, General Secretary of the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation (ITGLWF), died suddenly November 19th in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where he was making his 50th trip in two decades to help garment workers improve their lives in one of the world's most pervasive and brutal collection of sweatshop factories.

Like the good soldier for justice and solidarity that he was, Neil died with his boots on, fighting for the rights and the future of some of the most exploited workers on the face of the planet. His sudden death has shocked not only family, friends and comrades, but also a large number of employers who worked with him, including even the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers & Exporters Association.

Kearney's strategy for improving conditions in garment plants world-wide centered on establishing "mature industrial relations," as he explained in the "quote of the month" elsewhere in this edition. But he was characteristically clear-eyed about exactly what it will take to achieve this goal, and not only on the employer side of the equation.

In a speech just two months before his death, Kearney explained: "But, mature industrial relations are dependent on workers being able to join together in trade unions and elect their representatives to engage in negotiation and bargaining with their employer. This will require stronger labor legislation better enforced by governments, a commitment from employers to share the benefits of production, and a newly energized trade union movement willing and capable to engage fully on behalf of their members and aggressively to build membership, hone their representation skills, and actively involve all their members in the democratic life of the union."

Members of our Network send our heartfelt condolences to Neil's family and co-workers, and our admiration for a life well lived that ended way too soon.

■ ■ ■

As we end 2009 and look toward 2010, there are several projects coming into focus where members of our Network can play important roles. Some of projects involve training on site, but other projects need help with in research and technical assistance that can be done from anywhere. If you are interested in any of the following projects, please drop me an

email at garrettdbrown@comcast.net and I can send you the details.

- **China:** Health and safety training with the staff and key contacts of grassroots labor rights organizations working with migrant workers in the giant factories of the Pearl River Delta in southern China;
- **Dominican Republic:** Developing and establishing an effective plant health and safety program – especially in ergonomics – for a "no sweat" garment factory being established to produce logo goods for US universities;
- **Honduras:** Developing and establishing effective plant health and safety programs in garment plants, again especially in the area of ergonomics and chemical exposures.

There are also continuing projects to assist the Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational Accident Victims (ANROAV) and its network of 20+ groups in 14 countries in Asia; and work with longtime partners in Mexico.

If you have an interest, the appropriate skills and knowledge, and the time (some of which might actually be compensated) for any of these projects, please let me know. ■

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The Support Network has an extensive Reading and Resource List posted on the web site: www.igc.org/mhssn



Worker Rights Groups Launch Asia Floor Wage Campaign

*By the Maquila Solidarity Network
(Canada)*

On October 7, workers' rights groups in over a dozen countries throughout Asia, Europe and the Americas are participating in the public launch of the Asia Floor Wage Campaign (AFWC). The campaign is demanding a common minimum living wage for garment workers across the Asian region, in order to stop the destructive race to the bottom on wages and labour standards - which is fueled in part by companies moving production between countries in the region in search of ever-cheaper labour costs.

To this end the AFWC has calculated a minimum living wage (Asia Floor Wage) for the region as a whole, which has been standardized so that it can be easily converted to national currencies in key Asian garment-producing countries (including India, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, China and Hong Kong).

According to the AFWC, the Asia Floor Wage (AFW) is based on "the income required for a single earner to support a family of four (2 adults and 2 children) by working a legal maximum working week (but no longer than 48 hours), excluding any payment for overtime or other bonuses/allowances." It should provide enough income to pay for food and other essential living costs such as healthcare, housing, clothing, childcare, transportation, fuel, education, etc.

The AFW is expressed as a single figure that can be converted to local currencies using the World Bank's 'purchasing power parity' (PPP) formula so that the floor wage would allow workers to purchase the same amount of goods and services in each garment-producing country in Asia. The Asia Floor Wage for 2009 has been set at 475 PPP\$.

The garment industry's history of low wages, excessive overtime and poor working conditions is well known. Though small improvements have been made in some areas, on the issue of wages the

apparel industry has continually failed to act – arguing at times that it is enough to abide by local minimum wage laws and other times using the excuse that there is no commonly-accepted living wage figure for them to meet.

The fact is that legal national minimum wages set for workers in the apparel industry fail to provide enough income for workers to maintain their families above national poverty levels. Poverty wages push many workers into debt, lead to malnutrition, cause health problems, and make workers and their families extremely vulnerable should they face sudden unemployment, health problems or disabilities.

The Asia Floor Wage Campaign challenges the second industry excuse, by calculating a measurable floor wage

throughout Asia - one that has buy-in from workers' organizations across the region and which can easily be met without significantly reducing industry profits.

At an international level, the Campaign will pressure apparel brands and major suppliers to commit to meeting the AFW within their Asian supply factories. Trade unions at the local level will also push for the AFW from the bottom up through collective bargaining with factory management and popular campaigns.

The AFWC was formed by union leaders and labour activists in Asia's major garment producing countries that came together to explore a union-based Asian strategy for the global garment industry.

(See **AFWC**, page 5)

NETWORKING NOTES

- Network member Ingrid Zubieta at UCLA's Labor Occupational Safety and Health program gave a presentation to the national meeting of grantees of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) in North Carolina in October. Ingrid reported on the Network's ongoing project to characterize health and safety hazards – and assist striking miners improve conditions – at the giant open-pit copper mine in Cananea, Mexico.
- MHSSN coordinator Garrett Brown spoke at several conferences in the latter half of the year, including two conferences at the University of California in Los Angeles in July and October on labor and working conditions in the US, Mexico and China; the regional conference of Northwest sections of the American Industrial Hygiene Association in Vancouver, Canada, in October; the "National Summit on Occupational Safety and Health" organized by the National COSH Network in Philadelphia in November. Brown will also be speaking at the annual conference of the California Industrial Hygiene Conference in San Francisco in December.
- Brown authored several articles this fall related to the Network's work: an article in *EHS Today* in September about the global electronics industry, and an article in *New Solutions* in November about worker participation in global OHS programs. Both articles are posted in PDF format on the Network's website. Brown will participate in December in a webinar of the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH) about "ethical OHS in global supply chains" with Lynda Yanz of the Canadian Maquila Solidarity Network and Glenn Barbi of Becton, Dickinson & Co.
- An updated list of reports, articles, and cyber resources published in 2009 has been posted on the Network's website. The topic areas of the resource lists include: China, China factory reports, corporate social responsibility (CSR), global development and poverty, global electronics industry, global factory reports, global OHS resources, and Mexico.

(Asia OHS Movement, from page 1)

Our Network's role will be to build the capacity of the grassroots organizations in the area of OHS through on-site trainings, technical assistance, and collaboration with AMRC and the Hesperian Foundation in developing educational materials and a revised health and safety manual for electronics workers.

In September, the Asian Network for the Rights of Occupational Accident Victims (ANROAV) held its annual conference in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. ANROAV is a network of more than 20 grassroots OHS organizations in 14 Asian countries, and the Phnom Penh meeting was its largest conference ever at 140 participants. ANROAV has a website located at: www.anroav.org

MHSSN coordinator Brown teamed up with Robin Dewey and Valeria Velasquez of the UC Berkeley Labor Occupational Health Program (LOHP) to put on a two-day workshop on "principles of effective health and safety trainings." This was the second conference in a row where MHSSN and LOHP collaborated in an educational workshop at the ANROAV meeting. The 10-person US delegation also included representatives from the American Center for

International Labor Solidarity as well as Hesperian, ICRT, Santa Clara COSH, and our MHSSN.

Conference participants had a brief tour on one afternoon of a Taiwanese-operated sports clothing factory producing goods for Nike. The 2,000-worker plant has a union, which was one of the conference's host organizations, and generally better working conditions than other Cambodian garment sector facilities.

As part of the conference finale, the MHSSN contributed a dozen sets of workplace safety inspection equipment (sound level meters, electrical current testers, smoke tube kits) to groups from each of the countries represented at the conference. Our Network will be continuing to support the Cambodian participants and their organizations as OHS regulations, enforcement and actual practices are a virtually a "blank slate" in a country still emerging from decades of war and social dislocation.

The next ANROAV conference will be held in Indonesia in September 2010, and our Network will again collaborate with LOHP in developing an OHS-related workshop. Among the topics under consideration are asbestos hazards and controls (an Asia Ban Asbestos Network

was established in April 2009); effective OHS organizing with workers in the "informal sectors" of global economies; and principles of popular education.

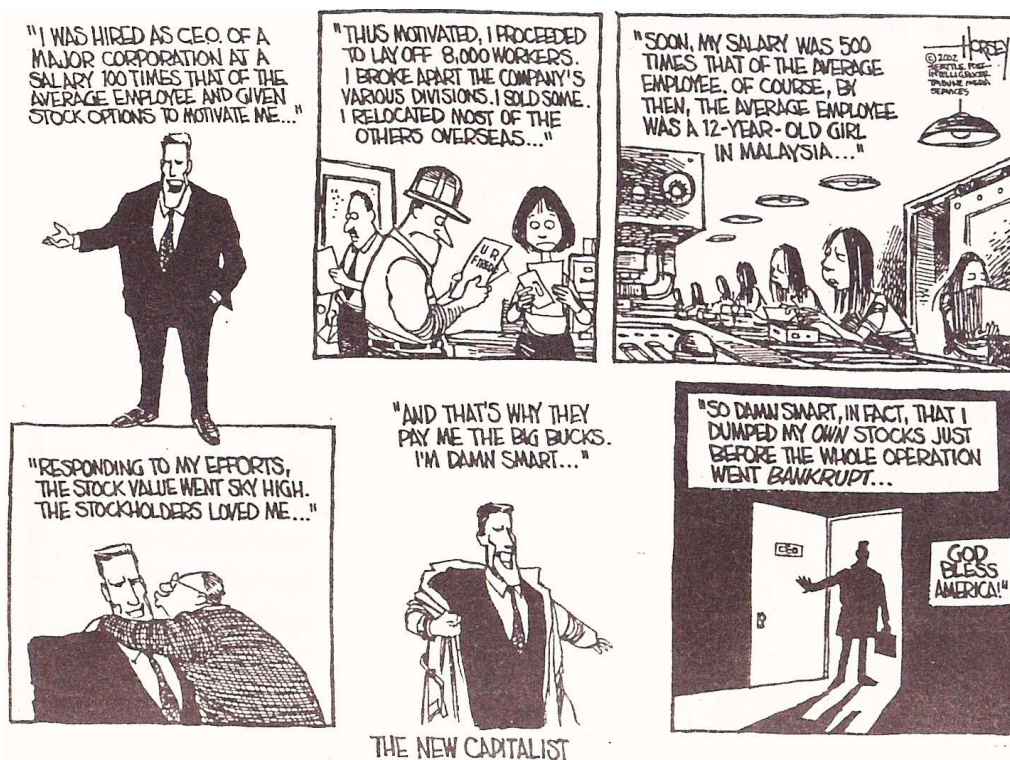
Our Network will work closely with the National Council of Committees for Occupational Safety and Health (COSH groups) in the United States so that the US COSH network, rich in experience with informal sector workers and asbestos campaigns, will be able to attend and participate in the 2010 ANROAV conference.

Also in 2010, our Network will continue to work with the Golder Associates consulting firm which has generously provided 50% discounts for grassroots leaders to attend its professional-level OHS training workshops throughout Asia. Since 2008 we have sent 11 staffers and volunteers from ANROAV groups to Golder Associate courses in China, India and Malaysia. In 2010, we expect to send ANROAV participants to classes in Jakarta, Manila, Shanghai and Delhi.

As an increasing share of the world economy's manufacturing is shifted to Asia, the global impact of unsafe and unhealthy working conditions in the region has grown. This not only threatens the well-being of Asian workers, but also

exerts tremendous downward pressure on working conditions throughout the global economy as a "race to the bottom" ensues as factory operators, now competing with all others in global supply chains, seek to achieve the lowest possible production costs.

The growth of ANROAV, the founding of the Asian Ban Asbestos Network, and ongoing campaigns for safe working conditions in electronics plants are evidence of increased awareness and activity around OHS issues in Asia. Our Network has a great opportunity to assist this movement achieve its full potential by participating in conferences, conducting trainings, providing technical assistance, and facilitating connections to OHS resources elsewhere in the world. ■



(Mexico at the Crossroads, from page 1)

Margaret Thatcher's successful assault on miners union in the UK in 1984.

If the Mexican government succeeds in abolishing the SME outright and continuing its war with the Miners union, then working conditions in Mexican factories – like other workers' rights – will be in jeopardy. It is not possible to improve workplace conditions in a context where workers have few or no rights to organize themselves, to act and speak in their own name.

The background to these crucial developments can be found in two excellent articles, and ongoing updates at the website of Mexican Labor News and Analysis (MLNA):

- "Mexico Revs Up War on Workers; Obama Shrugs," by Jeff Faux, October 12, 2009, posted on the Huffington Post at www.huffingtonpost.com/jeff-faux/mexico-revs-up-war-on-wor_b_317924.html
- "Mexican Electrical Workers Union Fights for its Life," by Dan LaBotz, October 19, 2009, posted on the

(AFWC, from page 3)

During initial discussions wages emerged as the central issue and the concept of an Asia Floor Wage was developed and refined between 2005 and 2007.

What began as an Asia-based process has now expanded to become an international alliance which includes support from labour rights groups around the world including the Clean Clothes Campaign, the Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN), the International Labor Rights Forum, and many others.

MSN sees the campaign as an innovative regional initiative for increasing wages in a global industry. We are exploring the potential for regional approaches to improving wages with our allies in the Americas, and will be making key materials about the AFWC available in Spanish to share with our allies in Latin America.

MSN will also be pushing apparel and footwear brands with which we are in contact to take action on the AFWC demands within their supply chains. ■

Monthly Review webzine at <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/labotz191009.html>

- Updates and ongoing coverage are posted at LaBotz's MLNA website at www.ueinternational.org/index.php

Understanding the political and social context of workplace safety is essential to developing and sustaining effective OHS programs anywhere in the world, and understanding the stakes and events now unfolding in Mexico is critical to the future work of our Network.

Meanwhile the plant-level efforts by grassroots worker organizations to improve workplace safety continue throughout Mexico.

In Guadalajara, the center of Mexico's electronics industry, the Jesuit social research organization CEREAL released in November its third report on conditions in the national semiconductor industry. The report, "Labor rights in a time of crisis," detailing mass lay-offs and deteriorating working conditions, can be found at: http://goodelectronics.org/publications-en/Publication_3281/

CEREAL also released in October a statement on the fifth anniversary of the code of conduct of the Electronics Industry Citizenship Council (EICC). The statement declared that working conditions in the almost 200 electronics companies in Mexico had not improved despite the promises made in the industry's code of conduct.

One positive development in Mexico this fall was that auto parts workers in Piedras Negras were able to establish a union at a former Alcoa electrical harness plant. After more than a decade of efforts, Alcoa workers founded a local or "section" of the national Mexican Mine Workers union, which also represents manufacturing workers.

Workplace health and safety issues have been a long-standing focus for workers at this plant, many of whom are members of CFO – Comité Fronterizo de Obreras, with which we have collaborated since the 1990s. Information on the developments in Piedras Negras can be found in the CFO's 2009 Annual Report at: www.cfomaquiladoras.org ■

Quotes of the Month

"The corporate social responsibility industry with social auditing at its heart is now a Euro 48 billion earner. But, looking at conditions in factories, it looks like most of this has been wasted, resulting, at best, in minor surface level improvements. Real change is going to require moving beyond codes of conduct and social auditing and ensuring that constant monitoring of factory conditions is undertaken by through a mature system of industrial relations where representatives of management and workers engage in social dialogue and negotiation on wages, working hours and working conditions. Such a mechanism is much more likely to deliver improvements than the failed legions of social auditors."

— Neil Kearney, General Secretary of the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation, September 25, 2009, speech to the University of Pavia, Italy.

"Yet how do companies know they respect human rights? Do they have systems in place enabling them to support the claim with any degree of confidence? In fact, most do not...Yet one surveys what companies actually do, more often than not one finds a replay of the 'legalistic' approach I've already mentioned: if it isn't required by law, we don't need to do it...If I had to summarize these developments in a single phrase, I would say this: the era of declaratory CSR is over; we moved into 'prove it' time. It is well and good for companies to claim that they respect human rights; they also need to demonstrate that they do."

— John Ruggie, UN Special Representative for Business and Human Rights, November 6, 2009, speech to the Canadian Business for Social Responsibility.