

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

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Spotlight on Erin Polaczuk (NZCTU - New Zealand)

"Focusing on decent jobs for young people"

Brussels 17 July 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): Last May, New Zealand was the host country for the regional seminar on youth employment organised by the ICFTU's regional organisation covering Asia and the Pacific (ICFTU-APRO). It enabled young trade unionists from the Asia-Pacific region to discuss the priority issue of decent jobs for young people. Erin Polaczuk, Vice-Chair of the APRO Youth Committee, outlines the main aspects of the event whilst assessing New Zealand's own employment policy.

What were the conclusions of the regional seminar in Wellington in May 2006?

The meeting provided an opportunity for the youth committees of the affiliates to exchange ideas and discuss the problems faced by young people in the Asia-Pacific region when looking for work. We also continued our drafting work on an ICFTU-APRO Youth Charter. This type of meeting always helps us build up international solidarity between young people. In addition, it gives a chance to many young people to take part in local trade union activities like our national campaign for raising the minimum wage. At the moment we are focusing on youth rights, since young people are being paid 20% less than adults for the same work. Such jobs are frequently offered by multinationals, which are keeping wages down by putting strong pressure on the government.

So the seminar provided a valuable opportunity for young trade unionists to express their views, exchange information and show the public what trade unionism is all about. By parading our slogans and banners all over the city we managed to attract attention and spark off conversations. These events show people that we are not working behind closed doors but are going out on the streets to meet people in order to convey our views on employment.

What priorities has ICFTU-APRO set for promoting youth employment?

The focal point of our work has been getting decent work for young people. So we are calling for more vocational training, job offers and temporary placements for young workers as part of a job creation and job promotion policy. We also need to monitor developments in different forms of work. We are also tackling the issues facing migrant workers, where there is much that needs doing in our region. We want to improve cooperation with the unions in neighbouring countries and conclude agreements protecting young immigrants and preventing them losing their rights as they cross the border. Our report on decent work is at the drafting stage and there are not many concrete measures planned yet, but these will be proposed in the next phase.

What are the employment trends like in New Zealand and the region as a whole?

The unemployment rate in New Zealand is at its lowest level in the last 15 years. But that does not mean wages are high. The youth unemployment rate is four times higher than the adult one. If we followed the current trends in developed countries the youth rate should only be 2.5 times as high as the one for adults. So economic growth is not having the anticipated beneficial effects, as far as young people are concerned, since their work remains insecure. Southern Asia is particularly badly hit by youth unemployment whilst the situation is better in Eastern Asia.

What are young women's working conditions like in New Zealand?

Many young women are exploited, in various ways. Many migrant women workers are employed in domestic work or supermarkets, which are jobs that no New Zealander would want to do today. In the 1970s the creation of a migrant under-class was a kind of policy.

What is the New Zealand government doing to increase the number of jobs for young people?

Our government is not particularly concerned about youth unemployment. It has adopted some positive measures, however, such as providing support for vocational training and modern curricula for apprenticeships. The budget has also increased in recent years.

Are young people interested in the union movement? What do they expect from the unions?

Young people are not necessarily joining unions, despite the fact that the unions are working on helping them join the labour market. That said, they do seem to be getting more interested. A few years ago, when young workers were campaigning and running recruitment drives at the grass roots, the young people they met had never heard of trade unions. Nowadays a lot of young workers are members since the unions' work on youth employment is better known. Many volunteers have also done a lot to promote trade unions. What is more, trade union action is becoming more in tune with young people's concerns. Having more young people in their ranks is also affecting how unions work. The challenge now is to keep all these people in the unions. Even if they are made redundant we need them to stay involved and continue to support trade union work.

Interview by Pierre Martinot

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