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Spotlight interview with Ambet Yuson (BWI - India)

"We have pulled 15,000 children out of work... and quadrupled our membership"

Brussels, 21 November 2007 (ITUC Online): India is the country with the largest number of working children in the world. Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI) is attacking this exploitation through community involvement and the building of schools. Ambet Yuson, BWI's regional representative in Asia Pacific, tells us about this trade union strategy that has allowed 15,000 children to get out of work and into school whilst increasing a number of unions' membership by 400%.

Why is it that children find themselves in working in activities as dangerous as brick kilns and quarries?

In these sectors, the wages depend on the individual production rate of each worker. In the brick kilns, for example, the wage depends on the number of bricks made. That's why adult workers take all their family with them to help, including their youngest children. It's a common phenomenon in India.

How did you embark on the fight against this exploitation?

Our first step is to organise more unions in these sectors. But if the first thing we say to the workers is that their children should stop working, they reply that their family income would fall, and refuse to join. So we had to use another strategy. After having convinced the workers to join the union, we started collective bargaining with the brick kiln owners, negotiating on a whole range of matters, including the key issue of wages. We managed to get wage increases of 35% on average, and were then able to get the children out of work and into school. This schooling gives the parents a sense of pride; it gives them hope. We have pulled 15,000 children out of work over the last ten years.

Aside from the pay increases and their children's education, the workers are happy to be in a union that protects their rights, negotiating better health and safety and working conditions. This is important, because these are dangerous sectors: the work is done under the heat of the sun, barefoot, and without protective clothing or equipment. It's the same in the stone quarries, where workers don't have the right shoes and break the stone without protective equipment.

How have employers reacted to this?

We take a holistic approach. We carry out campaigns in the communities to persuade people they shouldn't allow child labour in their villages. The campaigns consist in declaring a village "child labour free". If an employer in the village uses child labour, we wage a campaign on the subject involving the whole community. If the employer doesn't agree with the campaign objective, he has to fight the resolve of his whole community.

In some regions, we negotiate with the Brick Kiln Employers' Association at

state level, such as in Uttar Pradesh. Our next stage is to declare the whole state "child labour free". We have to work more in this direction, involve more players.

How do you organise these campaigns in the villages?

The campaigns are led by our members, who come from the villages. We supply them with campaign material, give them individual guidance... They are experienced members who have gone through these experiences themselves. They then go on to meet others and explain how they themselves have gone about things.

What happens when there is no school in the village?

If there is no public school, we build one ourselves. Our unions have built around 30 schools in India so far. Between 5000 and 7000 children have attended these schools over the last ten years. We also have bridging schools that get children who have never been to school ready to enter mainstream education.

Some former child labourers have already finished primary school, so we direct them to public secondary schools.

We have asked ourselves whether trade unions should get involved in building and managing schools. It is not, in fact, up to us but the government to provide basic education. But the schools we provide are "provisional", as we then go on to lobby the government to take charge of them. In the state of Punjab, for example, seven of our schools have been taken over by the government. It's a victory for the unions. The government did not have schools in these villages, but we set them up, and thanks to our lobbies, the authorities took over them, to our delight. So our strategy is based on a combination of trade union work, community involvement and, ultimately, passing over responsibility to the government.

How do you finance these schools?

We don't build big, very modern schools. We use what is available to us in the community, even if it's only a makeshift shelter that we refurbish a little. BWI affiliates from many different countries (in Europe, United States, Asia) are helping us to fund this programme. Thirty euros is enough to send a child to one of our schools for a year. So we ask our affiliates for support but, once again, this is only provisional: our objective is for the government to take over this responsibility in the end.

Do you offer food or money to the families that agree to let their children stop working and go to school?

No. Having said that, when children go to school they receive food there. This food is either provided by us or by subsidies from certain local governments. Some authorities also give a grant to children from lower castes if they go to school.

In some cases, we ask the parents to make a small donation, or to contribute to the project by cooking for the children who go to school. Our approach is not limited to the trade union, the whole community is involved.

Shouldn't the government punish employers who use child labour?

The brick kiln sector is quite informal. A company can easily fold its operations and reopen elsewhere. The idea is therefore to open a dialogue

with the bosses, to push them to commit to stop employing child labour. India is home to the largest number of child labourers; it's a huge challenge for the government, which has a policy to promote basic education, but always comes back with the response that it doesn't have enough money to build more schools. There really are a lot of villages without schools, and even if there is one, some families do send their children there because they need them to contribute to the family income. So when you talk about using sanctions to enforce the law... You can always take children out of work, but poverty will force them back into it. Child labour cannot be eradicated without tackling poverty.

How does this programme to fight child labour contribute to strengthening trade unionism?

In certain countries, unions sometimes have a poor image, but these schools for former child labourers give the unions more credibility, even with the authorities. They help give them standing as important and credible actors. Two of our leaders have, moreover, received an award (a medal and a little money) from the state of Uttar Pradesh, in acknowledgement of their services to the people.

It has also had a positive effect on union membership. Ten out of our thirty affiliates in India have schools for former child labourers, and five of them have been active since the launch of the project in 1995. Between 1995 and 2005, these five unions saw their membership increase by 400%, thanks to the increased credibility they acquired. More and more workers have heard about these trade unions and want to join. This also has a multiplier effect, and more and more unions want to work in the same way.

Do you receive support from the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC)?

We started out thanks to a small amount of funding from IPEC in 1995, for the state of Bihar. It worked well, and a lot of unions subsequently agreed to support us. We can make a little money go a long way.

Are you trying to reproduce these campaigns in other countries?

We started in Nepal, with the same approach, but we have to adapt it. In Nepal, the people working in brick kilns are migrants. They come to work during the dry season and their children can go to school, but during the rainy season they go back home, so we have to work more with the communities. We also have pilot projects in Latin America and Africa.

We are going to organise an international conference in India on 20 and 21 February 2008, concerning trade unions and child labour, to demonstrate just how effective we can be in this area. It will be organised in conjunction with other Global Union partners. This international conference will not be limited to us speaking between ourselves, but will also involve other actors, so we can look at how we can cooperate better to eradicate child labour.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

The ITUC represents 168 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 305 national affiliates. Website: <http://www.ituc-csi.org>.

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