

World News - N° 4 , 2002

PSI in Hanoi

What's new on the PSI Extranet

PSIRU expands

World Bank policy controversy

Globalisation report contradicts trade factor

Strikes continue in Benin

Emergency work measures in Japan

Fiji court rules for Chaudhry

Speight sentenced to death

New books

Tell us

PSI in Hanoi

PSI Regional Secretary for Asia-Pacific, Albert Ponniah, made contact with unions in Vietnam early this month. Albert joined with a delegation from Sweden in Hanoi in order to discuss the general situation in Vietnam and future activities with PSI. The Vietnam economy is now re-structuring following treaty arrangements with the United States and the European Union. It is disturbing that the health, water and electricity sectors may soon be opened to some form of privatisation. In the public sector, job cuts of about 15% are targeted. There are two main public service unions - the VPSU (general) and the VMSU (medical). Both are large. VMSU, for example, has nearly 250,000 members, more than half of whom are women. The unions are generally keen for training in collective bargaining so as to provide for their members in the new circumstances. PSI also offered to work with the unions in providing education programs on health and structural adjustment. Contact Albert at psiap@ppp.nasjonet.net.

What's new on the PSI Extranet

The PSI Extranet is being upgraded. The Extranet is the affiliate-only part of the PSI Website that requires special login arrangements. In response to comments that the login section is hard to find, the Website will shortly feature a new easy access Extranet button. Also, users do not want to waste time logging in if there is little new material in their interest areas. The Website will also feature a What's new on the Extranet section that can be accessed from the first page. All new material will be listed. The Extranet will also be used for the full range of material available from the Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU). Congress material will also be on this site. Contact caroline.taleb@world-psi.org.

PSIRU expands

The PSIRU has been so successful recently that it is beginning to run out of space at its Greenwich University site. The PSIRU now has 8 research staff.

Work planned includes a major project on water, and one on corruption funded by the Wallace Foundation. PSI has agreed with PSIRU that more effort will be made to make its reports more accessible to affiliates and related organisations. The PSI Extranet, for example, will carry links direct to PSIRU information on multi-national enterprises (MNEs) by region, by country and by sector, as well as research news reports for each region. Contact alice.carl@world-psi.org.

World Bank policy controversy

This month the World Bank Board will debate a proposed new private sector development strategy. According to an analyst at the London School of Economics, the proposal is the Bank's "biggest re-focusing in a decade". Already criticised by a wide range of organisations, the strategy includes full cost recovery and pure private sector provision of some services, notably in transport, telecommunications and energy. It says that subsidies "may be justified" in water, health and education, but not for infrastructure development such as pipelines, hospitals and schools. It also proposes new investment climate assessments. This would involve surveying private companies for their views on obstacles to their activities in particular countries. It also proposes to transfer more risk to the private sector to minimise government debt. However, if experience with Ghana water privatisation and the revisiting of the privatisation of Railtrack in the UK are any guide, private firms may be unwilling to take on such public service provision without government guarantees. See www.brettonwoodsproject.org. PSI has signed a joint statement with other unions and NGOs calling for Bank Executive Directors not to adopt this report.

Globalisation report contradicts trade factor

According to Harvard economist, Dani Rodrik, the World Bank is also in trouble about advocating pro-trade policies as necessary to economic growth and poverty reduction. Rodrik cites the Bank's own current report on globalisation as evidence of this. The report in effect says that integration into global markets is a consequence of economic growth, not that trade liberalisation leads to economic growth. In both India and China, the two growth miracles of the last 20 years, rapid economic growth and poverty reduction occurred about a decade before there was any significant trade liberalisation.

Strikes continue in Benin

PSI Regional Secretary for Africa and Arab countries, Têko Kpodar recently returned from Cotonou, Benin where public sector unions (and PSI affiliates) and education unions are continuing a series of 3-day strikes. Têko reports that the strikes result from the newly returned government's failure to uphold wage indexation agreements and the breakdown in talks over working conditions.

Emergency work measures in Japan

Japanese national union centre, JTUC-RENGO, has given its approval to a new work-sharing measure as a means of maintaining employment. With the Japanese economy in continuing recession and unemployment rising, the government, employers and unions have been debating work-sharing as a way of maintaining employment. JTUC-RENGO has agreed to matching salary cuts to cuts in working hours where work-sharing is implemented as an emergency measure, for example in cases of potential redundancy. The idea is also proposed as a longer term measure to enable more diverse forms of employment. The approval is "absolutely conditional" on the preservation of employment. This report from PSI Tokyo Sub-Regional

Secretary, Katsuhiko Sato, email: satok@jichiro.gr.jp.

Fiji court rules for Chaudhry

The Fiji Court of Appeal ruled last Friday that the Constitution had been breached because the Labour Party had not been consulted in the formation of Cabinet. Mahendra Chaudhry, the Labour leader, filed the case last year after his party was not included in Cabinet. The case will now be brought back to the High Court for orders. Contact the Fiji Trade Union Congress at ftuc1@is.com.fj.

Speight sentenced to death

In a related case, the leader of the group that overthrew the former Chaudhry government at gunpoint in 2000, George Speight, has pleaded guilty to 13 charges of treason and was sentenced to death. The sentence has since been appealed on the ground of mercy and commuted to life imprisonment.

New books

Whistleblowing Although UK-oriented, this book is a useful overview of the problems faced by whistleblowers (workers who want to expose wrong-doing). Even when workers are legally protected, they fear unofficial retaliation by employers and even hostility from other workers. The book details three case studies. It gives a useful list of resources on this issue, including PSI affiliate UNISON, which has guidelines for its members on this matter. The book, by Catherine Hobby, is available (in English) at £8 for trade unions and £30 for others from the IER at 177 Abbeville Road, London SW4 9RL, UK. The e-mail address is ier@ier.org.uk

Poverty Reduction Strategies

This booklet is an ICFTU publication. It is available in several languages. It is especially important for unions that are subject to World Bank or IMF poverty reduction programs. These programs are supposed to be negotiated with unions and other parts of civil society, as well as officially with government. The guide outlines examples, processes, resources and the steps that unions should take to get themselves included in the process by their governments. Affiliates that want copies should contact mike.waghorne@world-psi.org, including language version and the number of copies needed. Please let Mike know before 15 March.

Traditional knowledge and intellectual property rights The Quaker United Nations Office in Geneva has just published a discussion paper that looks at how traditional knowledge (TK) can be protected from MNEs. Several United Nations agencies, as well as the WTO have responsibilities in this area. The TRIPS agreement now allows MNEs to steal and expropriate TK owned by indigenous peoples. The paper is available at www.quno.org on the Geneva pages.

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