



Learning to lead

Aghni Dhamayanti was recently elected to the National Board of the IMF-affiliated trade union Serikat Pekerja Metal Indonesia (SPMI), after she and other women began solving problems in their workplace and became more involved in the union.

JAKARTA INDONESIA When Aghni Dhamayanti first started working at the Toshiba plant in Bekasi, outside Jakarta in Indonesia, there was no union. Yet she and her workmates were experiencing many problems so together with a friend they decided to form a union, affiliating it first to SPSI Indonesia, then eventually to the SPMI. As Aghni points out, many women are forbidden by their husbands or other family members from becoming active in the union. As a result, women's participation in SPMI was extremely low.

In 2003, IMF launched a project with SPMI, funded by the Swedish trade union centre LO-TCO, that aimed to organise more women workers and increase their role in the union. As a result, the union managed to increase the number of women members from 29,780 in 2003 to 42,272 in 2006. SPMI also focused on changing its union structures to enable increased participation of women. At its Congress in December 2006, SPMI adopted rule changes for a minimum of 30 per cent representation of women at all levels and elected women, including Aghni, onto its National Board for the first time. The number of women leaders at the branch level also increased from 18 per cent in 2003 to 25 per cent in 2006.

Aghni compares the initial impact of the project on the women of SPMI to entering kindergarten for the first

time. "Before the project, I only looked at issues at the plant level. The project enabled me to share information with women from other plants and regions and for us to encourage each other. By 2004," she says, "we felt that we had progressed to elementary school as we began to learn how to be leaders." When speaking of the four women now on the union executive, Aghni stresses that it is 'us' not 'me' – she sees the women's struggles and achievements as collective, not individual. While Aghni holds the position of women and youth empowerment on SPMI's National Board, the other women are responsible for finance, international relations and education, enabling the women to get involved in broader policy issues affecting the union.

Aghni says that thanks to the higher profile of women in the union, many women leaders are now emerging at branch and sectoral level. "In general there is a much greater awareness of women's issues in the union. For example, women usually only work in assembly line positions, although they would have the ability to progress further if they were given access to skills training, but they are not. In Indonesia, married women pay more tax and medical insurance than married men – after marriage men expect women to take care of the children so usually they resign from work."

Despite the problems, achievements are being made. For example, in Aghni's plant, pregnant women were accumulating poor absenteeism records as they were forced to skip work to attend medical appointments. The plant union was able to negotiate paid leave



Aghni Dhamayanti hopes to create new women leaders

for pregnancy medical checks and thus keep women's absenteeism records low.

Aghni describes her journey through the union as a gradual opening of her mind to issues beyond her plant to first the national and then the international trade union movement, and a recognition of the issues that unite women. "The most important thing for me is to create new women leaders who can work together and change things for the better."

Jenny Holdcroft

AGHNI DHAMAYANTI

Country: Indonesia

Position: Vice President, Women and Youth Empowerment

Union: SPMI

Interests: Reading, listening to music, tennis