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| http://www.solidaritycenter.org/content_images/infeconconf_banner.gif**Panel Response: How Are Established Trade Unions Organizing and Integrating Workers from outside Their Traditional Membership and Sector Base?****Facilitator: Alex Feltham, Solidarity Center*** Svetlana Boincean , SindLUCAS/IUF: organizing migrant agricultural workers through a Global Union Federation (Moldova)
* Cheung Yin Foon , Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions: integrating domestic workers in a national trade union center (Hong Kong)
* Mora Sar, Cambodian Food and Service Workers Federation: organizing informal beer hall workers in supply chain of a formal sector beverage company (Cambodia)

**The Case of the Cambodian Beer Workers**Mora Sar opened the panel discussion, telling the story of supporting women who work as promoters of beer in Cambodian bars and restaurants.He explained that the Cambodian Food and Service Workers Federation has long been working in the beer industry, which began to see a lot of outside investment after the 1993 democratic elections. Then, beer companies began hiring young Cambodian women to sell beer at restaurants, karaoke bars, and beer gardens.Some of the women were hired on contract, some on commission or salary bases. If the work was salary based, the employers usually were owners of Cambodian factories, and the workers were given contracts to promote beer. They were paid low salaries.Work based on commission primarily meant the promotion of imported beer. The women who sold beer under this arrangement were truly informal workers, even though they were wearing a company uniform. And they were informal workers with big problems. Their working reality was this: They worked primarily in restaurants and clubs, starting around 2 p.m. or 3 p.m. and going until very late at night, returning home at or after midnight. They received no overtime pay or leave, and only earned $50 to $60, which did not and does not come close to the amount of money one needs to earn (at least $150 to $200) to be able to survive in Phnom Penh. Plus, due to the golden rule that the customer is always right, they often worked in toxic workplaces, having to drink beer with the customers and often facing sexual harassment, about which they tended to remain silent.In 2006, the union began to work with beer promoters, many of whom came from rural areas to look for work in the capital. The young women were illiterate or had very basic education. The union found them difficult to organize and learned that it was not easy to explain to them what a union was, as they were not thinking about either their rights or even their future, Mora Sar said. Thus, it was easy for the employers to intimidate them if they spoke up or tried to found a trade union to try to earn a living wage and gain protection against sexual harassment.Another reason why these workers did not complain was (and is) the stigma attached to promoting beer in bars. They are considered little more than beggars. And when these workers went back home to their rural towns and villages, they never said what they did for a living due to this stigma attached to the job.The union’s organizing approach was to first go to the workplaces and then try to organize small meetings where the workers lived. There were attempts to organize seminars as well as attempts to provide legal aid when violations of workers’ rights at their workplaces took place (again due to the behavior of drunken customers, who would harass the women). Problems with both the police and military also were commonplace.The union tried a to help improve the working conditions of these workers when they went on strike for two weeks in order to get compensation for wages that had gone unpaid from 1996 to 2010. Unfortunately, some of them were fired. Other cases where the union tried to help support the workers revolved around overtime pay, as Cambodian labor law requires companies to pay double for overtime work. These workers work seven days a week, but the employers do not follow the law.The union also has addressed the issue of stigma by working with other organizations to help raise awareness of the problems faced by these workers. Sar said that there had been demonstrations, during which brochures, with information about the workers and their problems, were distributed. In addition, the union has worked to defend these workers’ rights with international trade union organizations (the International Trade Union Confederation) and national centers (the Dutch federation FNV) to try to reach the owners of beer companies in order to make the companies take more responsibility, convince them to pay a living wage, and prevent the forced drinking of beer with customers. **Hong Kong Domestic Workers Unite**Since the 1980s and as a result of to the open-door policy of the Chinese government, many electronic, textile, and garment companies once in Hong Kong have moved to mainland China. The de-industrialization of Hong Kong created many problems for middle-aged female workers, said Cheung Yin Foon [LINK TO REMARKS]. Many were left unemployed and forced to seek other ways to earn a living.A retraining program to teach unemployed women to become domestic workers was created. The Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) was one of several organizations that received subsidies from the government to organize retraining programs. The trade union’s organizers, working with the women, helped them form a union in 2001 with 600 members, mostly casual/flexible domestic workers. The promotion of worker rights and of sisterhood among domestic workers was the main reason behind the formation of the union.Most domestic workers have multiple employers, who very rarely observe worker rights or offer any social protection. The workers are scattered and isolated in homes. Organizing them proved complicated. They began by forming local branches, sited around the retraining centers. Activities that focused on jobs skills, sharing, arts, crafts, cooking, potluck suppers, and trips for the women allowed them to get together and get to know one another. One of the most important projects was providing training on cleaning skills, especially in light of the Lunar New Year, when there is a great demand for domestic workers to help families clean before the celebration. “We made sure the jobs were given to our members,” said Cheung. The union also taught labor law so as to inform workers that they must demand that their employers buy health insurance policies for them. This benefit helped the union retain membership.“Today, experienced members teach skills and share their working experience, which helps us all improve our own working skills,” she said. The union has had many success stories, including pushing the government to enforce the law on health insurance and negotiating with insurance companies to get a more affordable package every year. Now almost all employers buy insurance for domestic workers. **Strategies to Support Migrant Farm Workers**The International Union of Food, Agriculture, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers (IUF) “is committed to fighting for these rights for all migrant workers, documented or undocumented,” said Svetlana Boincean. [LINK TO PPT FILE 006A] The union is focused on organizing all workers, regardless of legal status, working in cooperation with unions in countries of origin and destination—as well as with non-governmental organizations and diaspora groups. In Europe, the union is working to provide migrants with information before departure, promote direct employment when they arrive, and represent them in negotiations and courts. It has helped Polish workers in Sweden, is working to eliminate child labor in Kazakhstan, and, in general, is working to ensure inclusion of equality principles in collective bargaining agreements. |
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