The fight for worker's rights in Indonesia



By Minh Lam

Working conditions within the borders of Australia's nearest neighbours were under the microscope when SSTUWA member Wendy Perriam attended an Indonesian trade union conference.

Ms Perriam accepted an invitation to attend the fourth congress of the Indonesian Worker's Unions (KASBI) held near Jakarta. She joined Lian Sinclair from the Community and Public Sector Union. Both women are part of the Unions WA International Committee.

KASBI (known locally as Kongress Konfederasi Aliansi Serikat Buruh di Indonesia) is a federation of Indonesia's various trade unions.

Key topics of discussion at the congress were issues surrounding outsourcing, workforce cuts, rogue companies and privatisation.

KASBI are currently campaigning for a national minimum wage of about $A370 a month for full-time employees and strong enforcement of existing labour laws.

It is also opposing the rise of contracting and outsourcing and advocating for the rights of migrant workers.

Ms Perriam said the country's Minister of Labour was openly questioned about the problem of labour laws not being abided by companies.

"These included some factories trying to pay workers wages below minimum wage, and also some factories denying workers the right to organise," she said.

"The KASBI organisers were very critical about big multi-national companies who will do everything that they can do keep costs down, by using low wages and long working shifts."

An example of this was the three-month strike of 800 workers over pay and work hours at Lee Max Industries, a Taiwanese firm that produces camera lenses.

"They used the strategy of shifting workers around to less desirable or lower paying positions," Ms Perriam said.

“The original union representative they sacked because the rep organised staff to join KASBI. In fact all 800 workers are union members.

The factory management (also) tried to remove essential machinery one night, but the strikers on picket lines prevented them.”

Ms Perriam said KASBI had organisers in Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Middle East to help Indonesian workers in industries such as construction and domestic services, where many live-in female workers reside in sub-standard facilities and are under paid.

“There is also an organiser for families, where the bread earner works away or overseas, to deal with the many problems of sickness or death, as there is often little or no communication between husband and wife,” Ms Perriam said.

“These are often construction workers who (can) earn twice the minimum wage.”

KASBI was formed in 2004 with 3,000 members. Today it has more than 200,000 members, with most being women and under the age of 35.

Young people and women occupy at least 50 per cent of leadership roles.

“This is a very strong union, they have fought to get their correct entitlements and they act in a very collective manner so problems seem to be solved – or collective action is taken, as in the Lee Max strike,” Ms Perriam said.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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