

Global priorities

The AEU's International Trust Fund is working with teachers and their unions in many countries where they can have a profound effect on living standards and human rights.

by **Larry Schwartz**

Briefly

- AEU members contribute to the AEU's international work through the International Trust Fund.
- The broad aim of the work is to create teacher trade unions that are strong, independent and democratic.
- Other programs support human rights, teacher training, and the role of women.

Solidarity with teachers and educators in other countries including the provision of trade union training and emergency assistance in times of crisis, are some of the ways that AEU members contribute to the development of teachers and their unions as far afield as southern Africa and central Asia.

Through its International Trust Fund (ITF), the AEU works with unions in developing countries to promote human and labour rights including the rights of children and adults to access high quality public education, the

development of women in teacher organisations, professional development for teachers and educators and solidarity and emergency assistance. The ITF contributes to multilateral programs run through Education International (EI) with other EI member organisations and also works in bilateral partnerships with teachers and their organisations in a number of developing countries.

"Our overall objective is to create teacher trade unions that are strong, independent and democratic," says AEU deputy federal secretary Darcel Russell.

She stresses the need for unions that are strong enough to operate independently of government, able to speak out on behalf of members and ensure the engagement of women, in both union structures and programs.

"There are teachers in almost every community in the world, and with the right structures and tools, we can be agents for effective political change," says Russell.

One of the ITF's priorities is to work in cooperation with the EI sub-regional structure – the Council of Pacific Education (COPE) – to support the growth of, and to strengthen teacher unions in the Pacific. This work is done in cooperation with other education unions in Australia and New Zealand.

"Working with our teacher colleagues in the Pacific is extremely important to us," says Russell. "We see the development of lasting relationships through cooperation with our closest neighbours as being one of our key priorities."

COPE's work includes developing and delivering a range of training programs to teachers in the Pacific. Working with Pacific Island countries such as Tuvalu, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea

and Fiji provides some geographical challenges. COPE delivers training to union leaders and members on a diverse range of programs, such as the UN Convention of the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Education for All, combating HIV AIDS through education along with union leadership and governance.

"There are a range of challenges confronting teachers in the Pacific," says Russell. "Teacher shortages and the training and qualification levels of teachers are just some of the issues. These are compounded by the political instability in some countries, high levels of poverty in both urban and rural areas



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Darcel Russell

AEU deputy federal secretary



and the looming impact of climate change on some Pacific Islands.

“The important thing,” she says, “is to draw on the knowledge and expertise of our teacher colleagues in the region to develop and implement training and support that is appropriate to local needs.”

Strong ties

EI, the Brussels-based global teachers’ union federation, represents 30 million teachers and education workers in 173 countries and territories. The AEU has a strong cooperation relationship with the EI Asia Pacific regional office, based in Kuala Lumpur.

“Similar to our work in the Pacific, our work in Asia reflects our commitment to teachers in the region to which we belong. Strong regional ties are very important to us,” says Russell.

Through the EI Asia Pacific regional office, the AEU works with a consortium of unions including Lararforbundet (Sweden), the National Education Association (United States) and the Utdanningsforbundet (Norway) and Japan Teachers’ Union (Japan) on an *Persatuan Guru Republik Indonesia* (the Indonesian teachers’ union) membership training program in 28 of the country’s 33 provinces.

“It is important to us to work closely

Through APHEDA, the International Trust Fund has supported occupational health and safety training for women in Laos.

with teachers in Indonesia to broaden participatory democracy, particularly because the country has undergone much political change over the last 10 years. We share the view that strong democracies require strong civil society organisations including strong trade unions.”

The John Thompson Fellowship program, originally a Canadian Teachers’ Federation initiative, is one of the largest of a range of education union development programs the ITF provides assistance to in the Asia-Pacific region.

Under the program, which also operates with different partners in regions including Africa and the Caribbean, teacher union leaders are trained in areas such as union governance, finances and running campaigns.

In recent years, the program's focus on training leaders has included sessions on union structures and decision-making, teams and team building, union history and vision, women in unions, conflict resolution, negotiation, strategic planning, human rights, children's rights and union rights. Participants from Asia have also visited Malaysia's National Union of the Teaching Professional to share experiences and learn from its successes. This year the John Thompson program has been run for EI's Pacific affiliate for the first time.

The ITF has also contributed, through the Australian Council of Trade Unions' overseas aid agency, APHEDA Union Aid Abroad, to the running of the International Centre of Trade Union Rights (ICTUR) in Indonesia.

"This is a reflection of our commitment to the broader union movement, including the promotion of human rights and labour and trade union rights," says Russell.

ICTUR, established in December 2003, is an NGO for advocacy and research on labour laws. Its main objective is to provide support for the development of Indonesian trade unions.

Strategic focus

The AEU works in the Central Asia region with a consortium of EI and partners from countries including teacher unions from Finland, Norway and Sweden. The work of the consortium



reflects a resolution passed by the 5th world congress of EI, held in Berlin in 2007, which mandated EI's executive board to develop further strategies and plans to promote and facilitate international trade union development cooperation.

"The recommendation established that development cooperation should aim at accomplishing goals set by the national education unions involved, and take into account the right to education for all, the professional interests of teachers and their terms and conditions of employment and the achievement of ILO core labour standards," says Russell.

The program of training aims to promote a better understanding of democratic trade unionism, good governance, transparency and accountability and to address education issues in the era of the market economy and decentralisation. This is particularly relevant as these former Soviet states have undergone massive social and economic change since they achieved independence. It seeks also to promote greater participation by women and young leaders and to create a pool of skilled trainers to ensure the programs can be sustained in to the future.

Planning and evaluation meetings and extensive training sessions have been conducted in all central Asian countries that are partners in the consortium, mainly Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

"Aside from the challenges of working in a region as isolated as Central Asia, the program itself is on track. Participants in the training have said that they had improved their understanding of the roles of trade unions in market-based economies, the workings of their own union and democratic decision-making processes."



(Above) Trade union training in Indonesia. (Opposite page, from top) Karen refugees learn about nutrition; community radio journalist in South Africa.

The ITF has also contributed to teacher union development in Zimbabwe. In April last year, EI and cooperating partners launched a plan to help the country's four EI member organisations to continue to function and provide services to their members during its' economic crisis.

Women's participation and representation

The AEU's commitment to the rights of women, including women's participation and representation in trade unions is also reflected in the work of the ITF.

Workshops run in Pacific Island countries through COPE focus on increasing women's participation in unions, resulting in some organisations changing their constitutions to ensure the principle of women's representation is embedded in organisational structures.

In India, the AEU works with the All India Primary Teachers' Federation on a program focused on the development of women's leadership and activism, through the AIPTF Women's Network.

Through APHEDA Union-Aid Abroad, the ITF supports training for rural women in Cambodia, including vocational skills for farm workers. Shamsa Sadik, a TAFE teacher from Western Australia, has been working with APHEDA as a technical adviser to subsistence farmers. Rural families have benefited by learning about organic home gardening, fish farming, nutrition, maternal and child health, HIV education and family planning.

Through APHEDA, the ITF also supports vocational and human rights training for Karen refugee women on the Thai-Burma border, and a range of other programs.

Teachers united

Last year, the ITF began a cooperation project supporting a network of Burmese teachers and teacher educators based on

the Thai-Burma border to produce a magazine and establish resource centres to promote education and human rights for Burmese refugees.

Through APHEDA, the ITF supports teacher training and professional development in Laos, working in cooperation with a government teacher training college, Pakse college. The college based in southern Laos provides teachers with a resource kit including pencils, materials, mini blackboards and chalk. It also aims to set up a mentoring and support system for teachers in isolated and rural areas.

"APHEDA, Pakse College and the AEU share the view that ensuring children attend school is only one of the steps to a quality education," says Russell. "Supporting teachers' professional development and training is the best way to provide children with the highest quality education possible."

Teacher trade unionists around the world have much in common, says Russell. "When you bring a group of teachers together in a room, regardless of where they are from, there are so many commonalities that link us. One of the great things about the work we do internationally is that it provides opportunities for those sorts of linkages to occur."

"The general theme of our work in this area is connectedness – teachers working with teachers to develop strong, democratic, independent trade unions and to improve access to high quality public education for all," Russell says. ●

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