

# Disenchanted isles

Teachers in the Pacific Islands live in a world marked by hardship, reports **Diny Slamet**.

**T**he challenges facing Solomon Islands National Teachers Association union representative Mary Susurua every day would floor the average Australian union rep. For a start, her membership is spread over hundreds of islands in a vast area of the South Pacific. As a primary school principal, she also has to deal with a student base traumatised by ethnic rivalries,

poverty and the dislocation caused by an earthquake and tsunami earlier this year.

Sister Kibaria Maritino, a Kiribati National Union of Teachers leader, says her union has no office and no computer. Members are so poor, the union must subsidise their 50 cent bus fares to attend meetings.

Susurua and Maritino visited Australia recently as recipients of the Alisi Fusi Wightman Scholarship (see box, right), which

brings female Pacific teacher unionists to Australia and New Zealand to increase their knowledge and confidence. The scholarship program is run by the Council of Pacific Education, whose membership includes the AEU, Independent Education Union of Australia, Victorian Independent Education Union, their New Zealand counterparts and affiliate unions in Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji,

Tonga, Cook Islands, Samoa, Tuvalu, Kiribati and New Caledonia.

Recipients spend a week in Australia and a week in New Zealand, being shown how their teachers unions operate, how they track members, respond to members' concerns, collect fees, organise for women and interact with education departments. The scholarship recipients also visit schools, attend union meetings, observe internal union activities and training, and go on other outings relevant to their interests.

### Uphill struggle

Susurua says attracting and keeping members is an uphill struggle for her union. About 2,800 of the 4,000 teachers in the Solomon Islands are members. With salaries so low, teachers are reluctant to pay union fees. They need a very convincing argument to join, she says. "Many teachers don't know their rights to join a union and what the union can do to help them as workers and individuals."

"Another issue is the competency of the union. We've had big numbers enrolled and then slight declines, and this has to do with the union's confidence. When a leadership comes in and doesn't show confidence, membership drops. Right now we are in a period of recovery."

Teachers posted to remote islands face special problems including inadequate housing. "The communities usually provide the housing, but they are poor so the houses are not good," says Susurua. "The provincial government is supposed to improve the housing, but often this is not done. The remoteness of the islands means teachers do not receive the services and resources they should, such as teaching materials. Also, the beliefs and culture of the islands can be a problem. A teacher from one island teaching on another island can lead to ethnic tension. Having to adapt and be accepted by the community can be hard."

Many Solomon Islands teachers are leaving the profession, creating a shortage that will hamper the country's development.

### Alisi Fusi Wightman Scholarship

Established in 1991, the scholarship is named after Alisi Fusi Wightman who was an activist in the Fijian Teachers' Association in the 1970s and 1980s. She was a vice-president of the association and its only female leader at the time. She had strong values and encouraged women in the profession. She died suddenly in her early 50s, soon after moving to Tonga with her husband, a member of Fiji's National Olympic Committee.

### Valuable forum

Susurua says her experiences in Australia and New Zealand will help her become a better unionist and teacher. Hearing Opposition deputy leader Julia Gillard and ACTU president Sharan Burrow speak at an Emily's List function was one valuable experience, both politically and culturally. The idea of mentoring, training and

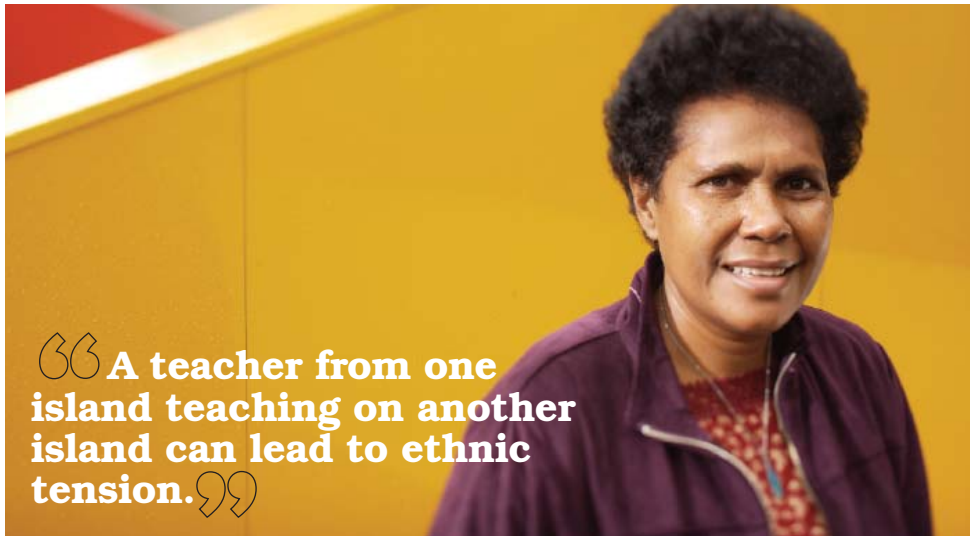
Members are so poor, the union must subsidise their 50 cent bus fares to attend meetings.

campaigning for potential female politicians was new to her. Her country has no female members of parliament.

"I was impressed with how Julia Gillard presented herself in promoting labour laws to address women's issues in the workplace and family. The way they organised the forum was very interesting, and the fact that men were there to support the women. That's not common in the Solomons, where men hold the power. To have a man attending a women's forum would be regarded as an honour."

AEU women's officer Catherine Davis says Susurua and Maritino

PHOTOS: JAMIE MURCH/LEFTFIELD, WILLIAM WEST/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



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Learned how unions conduct sub-branch meetings and engage with women members, and how to deal with sensitive issues such as discrimination. They also learnt from school visits that examined student gender issues, a visit to Trades Hall and a work-life forum with Professor Robert Drago, from Penn State University in the US.

Maritino, president of the Kiribati Teachers Women’s Network, was awestruck by the sophistication of the Australian and New Zealand unions. “It’s a huge thing for me to see because we don’t have an office. This office is a real luxury,” she said of the Australian facilities. “Our union secretary is a deputy principal at a

secondary school and her office is our union office. She uses the laptop computer to communicate with people because we have no computers. We don’t have enough money and we have no staff.”

The specialised structure of union officers was another eye-opener. “When I go home I might ask the education ministry to give us more opportunities to educate men and women to be leaders in different functions,” she says. “The AEU has personnel to coordinate the needs of teachers in areas such as early childhood, disabilities, secondary school, primary school... We need that type of organisation.” ●

**DINY SLAMET is a freelance writer.**

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