

Building workers face global fight

The 14th Congress of the UITBB

(Trades Union International of Workers in the Building, Wood, Building Materials and Allied Industries) meeting in Athens in September brought together trade unionists from 40 countries representing several million workers in the construction, wood and building materials industries.

During the two days of conference, the delegates engaged in lively discussions on the international situation with its threats of imperialist war and aggression, on capitalist globalisation and its disastrous impact on working and living conditions of the majority of people, on the industrial challenges faced by workers in their respective countries as well as on the environmental challenges.

Debates highlighted that whatever the country, region or continent, construction and wood workers are among the worst hit by precarious labour conditions (informal

labour, undeclared labour, bogus sub-contracting or self-employment, even forced labour, e.g. Pakistani brick kiln workers), by efforts to dismantle our social and economic rights, by serious attacks on our collective rights to take industrial action, to bargain, etc.

OH&S was a major concern of many speakers, in particular the threat presented by uncontrolled sub-contracting practices and the lack of training. A resolution calling for a total ban on asbestos and asbestos-based products was unanimously adopted.

The conference passed a special resolution expressing solidarity with the 107 Aussie workers in Western Australia being persecuted by the Howard Government.

It calls upon the UITBB member and supporter unions to render assistance by way of messages of protest to the Australian Government and financial assistance to the

special fighting fund set up to assist these workers, where possible.

Finally, the participants spoke strongly in favour of peace and disarmament, in particular the banning of nuclear weapons (and condemned the criminal occupation by the coalition forces of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Last but not least, the UITBB Conference set up a Women's Committee to work out a strategy aiming at intensifying UITBB action in favour of equality and social justice.

As to the successful outcome of the 14th Conference, some facts speak for themselves: eight unions, among them, the biggest being the Construction Workers' Union of Venezuela and the Federation of Greek Construction Workers requested and obtained affiliation with the UITBB.

For the full report, see the CFMEU website at www.cfmeu-construction-nsw.com.au or the UITBB webpage at www.uitbb.org

No safety net when illegal worker falls



WORN OUT

Zin Hta at the Mae Tao clinic with the chair and mattress that make up his home

Former construction worker Zin Hta

sits on a mattress in the corner of a room in Mae Tao clinic in north Thailand, 4km from the Burmese border. His paralysed legs are drawn up so that he sits cross-legged facing a draughts board made from cardboard.

Judging from the number of beer bottle tops/draughtsmen in his lap he is well on the way to being the winner. Thirty-seven-year-old Zin Hta could do with a win in life.

He was 30 when he fell two storeys from what passed for scaffolding on a building site just outside Bangkok. He broke his back, severing his spinal cord, and smashed his skull. The sub-contractor was too scared to leave the site, on which they were building a private house, to take him to hospital. They had to wait until the owner returned.

How long did he wait? "Not too long – a day" he says.

Zin Hta is a Shan refugee from Burma. He was 24 when he left Burma chasing work in Bangkok. For six years he worked a six-day week at 140 baht a day (just under \$6). Then

he fell. Four years after the accident Zin Hta was moved from a hospital to the Mae Tao clinic. Founded in 1989 by Dr Cynthia Maung, a Karen woman, the clinic provides free health care for an ever-increasing number of refugees from Burma. Landmine injuries, severe malnutrition and malaria are some of the conditions treated by the workers at the clinic. Increasingly people like construction worker Zin Hta find refuge there.

The parameters of his life now are the mattress, the cardboard box that contains all his belongings, and a second-hand wheelchair whose tyres are so worn it is a battle to make it move. Thai workers who are injured might have some financial safety net; workers like Zin Hta have none.

"Sometimes I feel sad at why my life is like this," he reflects, "I have to stay because I have nowhere to go." For now he would be happy with a new set of wheels.

For more information or if you want to help contact Phil Thornton by email: thorntonphil@yahoo.com.au

Campaign wins union leader freedom

The power of solidarity has been highlighted with the release from jail of Iranian bus union president Mansour Osanloo. Osanloo was freed in December after the UN's International Labour Organisation took up his case at the request of the International Transport Workers Federation and International Confederation of Free Trade Unions.

The CFMEU was among the global unions that sent letters of protest to the Iranian Government. It was the second time in jail for Osanloo, who spent eight months in jail after a bus workers' strike shut down the Iranian capital of Tehran.

The Syndicate of Workers of the Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company was formed in 1968, but disbanded in the 1980s. It has

been targeted by the repressive Iranian regime since workers reformed it in 2003 as an independent union. The bus workers of Iran still need our help with 50 comrades of the bus union sacked for supporting union activities with 27 of those workers terminated by the Labour Ministry.

To sign the petition visit: www.itfglobal.org/solidarity/iranpetition.cfm