

The Independent Monitoring Project: Training Health and Safety Activists in Unions and NGO's in Asia

Transnational corporations currently account for two-thirds of the industrial growth in the developing world. One of the key issues surrounding the globalization of labor and “sweatshop” issues is the development of various code of conduct systems for monitoring working conditions in international factories. These codes of conduct look at labor practice issues, including health and safety conditions, in shoe, toy, garment, and other manufacturing industries. Monitoring proposals like the Fair Labor Association and the Worldwide Responsible Apparel Program have been embraced by some transnational corporations and debated and critiqued by many unions, human rights and environmental groups. Yet these groups have recognized that independent monitoring can be an important component of efforts to enforce labor laws and improve working conditions in these factories.

The Independent Monitoring Project (IMP) was developed to build the capacity of local groups in Indonesia and southern China to identify, evaluate and develop action plans to correct workplace health and safety hazards. In 1999, the project received a two year grant from the MacArthur Foundation to support project activities. The IMP is working in partnership with local NGO's (non governmental organizations) and unions in Indonesia and Southern China to conduct health and safety trainings and involve groups in pilot audits of health and safety conditions in workplaces operated by both national and transnational corporations.

In June of 2000, project staff conducted a 4 day training on workplace health and safety issues in Jakarta, Indonesia with thirty-two Indonesian labor and community activists from 14 leading NGO's and trade unions. The training consisted of three days of classroom activities and an 8 hour field day evaluating hazards and controls at the 7,800-worker Pratama sports shoe factory in Tangerang, Indonesia. Pratama is operated by a Korean corporation and produces 600,000 pairs of shoes each month for Nike Inc.

The eight NGOs represented at the training included LIPS, SISBIKUM, PMBB, ISJ, YBP, LBH Jakarta, Labor Education Center and APIK, which include labor rights, women's rights, human rights and legal service organizations. The six trade unions represented were PKU, SBJ, ABGTeks, SBSI, SPSI Reformasi and GSBI. The Asia Monitor Resource Center (AMRC) in Hong Kong also sent a staff member to attend the session.

The training was coordinated locally by the LIPS labor information center led by veteran labor activist Fauzi Abdullah. The international training team included Maquiladora Health and Safety Support Network member and Cal OSHA industrial hygienist Garrett Brown, health educators Diane Bush and Betty Szudy from the Labor Occupational Health Program at the University of California at Berkeley, as well as MIT professor Dara O'Rourke and Australian occupational hygienist Melody Kemp (who has lived and worked in Indonesia for many years). IMP project staff worked with LIPS to conduct a

written needs assessment and group discussion with participating groups prior to the training.

Interactive, participatory techniques were used to cover topics such as identifying and evaluating hazards, industrial hygiene controls, how chemicals affect the body, reproductive hazards, ergonomics, workplace stress, noise, safety issues like machine guarding, electrical hazards and fire evacuation, workers' legal rights, and workplace inspection techniques. Popular education training methods were also shared so participants could pass along the information to others in their groups and communities.

Training exercises over the first two days included a "hazard hunt" to practice using industrial hygiene equipment such as noise and ventilation monitors. Participants learned about specific chemical hazards by deciphering "Material Safety Data Sheets" and by marking T-shirts with drawings of target organs (liver, lungs, kidneys, etc.) to show the short-term and long-term effects of chemical exposures.

During the plant walk-around on the third day, training participants interviewed workers and supervisors, monitored noise levels, evaluated ergonomic problems, checked electrical wiring, and used smoke tubes to evaluate ventilation systems. On the final day, small groups of participants created hazard or risk maps of the plant and developed written summaries of chemical, physical and social stresses (such as sexual harassment, production pressures, etc.) in the plant.

All training materials were translated into Indonesian, and English-speaking instructors had simultaneous translation for their presentation and activities.

The participating organizations themselves will decide how they wish to use the information and tools they gained in this and future trainings. Among the options available are applying to become "independent monitors" in one or more of the various monitoring systems evaluating the labor practices of multinational corporations; becoming more informed and skilled "monitors of the monitors;" and/or better integrating health and safety issues into their ongoing national organizing and international solidarity campaigns.

This training was the first time a group of labor activists had been given access to a production plant operating for a US-based multinational for a training exercise. In their evaluations of the training, participants indicated that the hands-on practice in the plant site visit was the "best activity."

Fifteen managers from Pratama (the Korean contractor) and four other Jakarta-area plants producing for Nike took advantage of the opportunity to participate in the field-day exercises. They formed their own inspection group, in addition to three groups of NGO/union participants, and rotated through four departments of the shoe factory during the day, conducting their own assessments of hazards and possible improvements.

Plans are already in motion for a follow-up training in Jakarta next spring. The schedule may involve a two-day refresher for the June participants followed by another four-day training with a new group of NGO and union representatives, including more participants from outside Jakarta. Some of the first training's participants will become peer trainers and instructors in the follow-up training.

The Independent Monitoring Project also aims to build the capacity of worker and community organizations in Hong Kong and Southern China. The China project has goals similar to the Indonesian trainings and will be driven by the needs and strategies of local groups. Over the last six months, IMP staff have met with leaders of the Asia Monitor Resource Center, the Hong Kong Christian Industrial committee, the Association for the Rights of Industrial Accident Victims and groups making up the LARIC (Labor Rights in China) coalition to discuss possible health and safety projects inside China. They have also met with Board members of the Chinese Working Women's Network, which has an office in Shenzhen city in China and a travelling bus that conducts health and safety trainings with working women in eight towns in the heavily industrialized Guangdong province. They have also held discussions with the labor practices managers of Reebok and Adidas footwear companies in Hong Kong. They visited Adidas' 13,000-worker section of the 60,000-worker shoe complex in Dong Guan City, which is operated by a Taiwanese corporation known as Yue Yuen inside China and Pou Chen outside of China.

Discussions with both the Hong Kong-based NGOs and the multinational shoe producers are continuing, and it appears likely a ground-breaking health and safety training inside China may be possible in 2001. This training would involve participants from the LARIC groups, the Chinese Working Women's Network and production-worker members of plant health and safety committees from the plants of three international sports shoe companies.

For more information about the Independent Monitoring Project, please contact Garrett Brown at gdbrown@igc.org.