



## Case Study

### Strengthening the Voice of Cambodia's Teachers

#### Cambodian Independent Teachers Association, Cambodia

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*Where teachers are well organised, they achieve better working conditions and standards of education improve.* This was the message that Rong Chhun, President of the Cambodian Independent Teachers Association (CITA), gave to six hundred teachers at the Association of Teachers and Lecturers' AGM in Liverpool.



Through its support from DFID, One World Action has been working in partnership with CITA to protect and promote teachers rights across Cambodia. In 2009 Rong Chhun visited the UK to raise awareness about CITA's work and the desperate conditions currently facing Cambodian teachers. During the week he also met with representatives from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Ann Clwyd MP's office (Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Human Rights), UNISON, TUC, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, NASUWT Teachers Union and VSO.

Under the Khmer Rouge (1975–1979) 195,000 teachers were systematically killed and the education system was largely destroyed. It is slowly being rebuilt but many challenges remain, and there is still a shortage of schools and teachers. Teachers receive very low salaries (per month \$42 for primary school, \$57 for junior high school and \$82 for high school), which is not enough to cover basic needs, particularly with dramatic recent increases in the cost of living. Recent research conducted by CITA showed that 54% of teachers have to take time out from the school day, to supplement their income with additional work such as vending or driving taxis. Around 20% of the national budget is allocated to education and it is a priority for many international donors, however teachers' continue to be excluded from policy debates and from decisions that affect them.

*Facilities and training are limited and many teachers are frustrated and afraid. The boat is on the water but the water can also control the boat! If teachers work together then we can raise our voices and work together for change - all teachers and all children in Cambodia deserve a decent education system and living conditions. CITA are working to reform the education system and achieve education for all.*

Rong Chhun

With a small grant from One World Action over the last few years CITA have been able to:

- Increase their membership to 9,200 members (approx 10% of all teachers) and set up 19 provincial branches (out of 24). Increasing their membership is essential to improve CITA's legitimacy to speak on behalf of Cambodia's teachers in negotiations with the Ministry for Education.
- Secure a permanent office in Phnom Penh, with full time paid staff.
- Implement union organising, awareness raising and campaigning activities - more teachers are now paid on time because of CITA's interventions.
- Develop local mechanisms for teachers to be consulted and give their inputs on educational policy issues.
- Conduct trainings on the rights and responsibilities of teachers and disseminate copies of the new National Education Policy to teachers.

In May 2009 OWA secured a two year grant from the UK Government's Human Rights and Democracy Fund to consolidate and build on this work.

*Teachers are nervous about joining CITA and face threats and harassment if they do. There are many cases of CITA members being forced to resign, being demoted or posted to remote areas. CITA's meetings have also been dispersed by the police.*

Rong Chhun

Although the right of teachers to organise is recognised in law, this is barely accepted by the Ministry of Education. Cambodia is a dangerous place in which to be a trade unionist and CITA members face harassment, threat of dismissal and intimidation. However despite these challenges CITA continues to grow and to maximise the limited political spaces they have available, to advocate for a Cambodia where both its teachers and children get a fair deal.

*CITA's vision is to unite teachers across the country, to promote and protect their rights and to create a strong, progressive and inclusive education system for all Cambodian children. CITA have improved the working conditions of teachers and decreased the restrictions under which they work. Teachers are now more aware about their rights and know how to protest. Teachers can now file a complaint and conduct strikes. It is not just teachers who benefit but also students, parents and citizens.*

Leng Bunhong, CITA



#### **Background Facts**

- Cambodia is one of the poorest countries in Asia with around 80% of the population living on less than 2 US\$ a day.
- Cambodia's population is very young and around 50% of its people are under 18 years old.
- There are 97,000 teachers in Cambodia (around 37,000 are women).
- The Cambodia People's Party has been in power since 1979 and corruption and human rights abuses are widespread. Rong Chhun has been imprisoned for his union activities. Despite Cambodia's formal commitment to national and international ILO conventions, core labour standards are still not being met. Independent trade unions, essential to strengthening democracy and holding institutions accountable are currently fragile, under resourced and operating in an extremely difficult context.
- Rong Chhun's recent speech to ATL's AGM can be found at:  
<http://www.atl.org.uk/Images/Rong%20Chhun%20speech%20to%20ATL%20Conference.pdf>
- Further information about CITA can be found at: [www.oneworldaction.org/our\\_partners/asia-partners/cambodia\\_partners.htm](http://www.oneworldaction.org/our_partners/asia-partners/cambodia_partners.htm)
- One World Action has been working in Cambodia since 2003 – it also works with the Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia, organise textile workers, and the Committee for Free and Fair Elections (COMFREL).