

Speech by Mr Rong Chhun, President of the Cambodian Independent Teachers' Association (CITA), to ATL Conference 2009

Respected Conference - Ladies and Gentlemen!

Today is a very important event for Cambodian citizens and I am honoured to be invited by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers to join your conference. I would like to express my deep thanks and warmest greetings.

We formed CITA in the belief that by coming together as teachers that we would be able to support each other under very difficult conditions.

Being invited to join you, knowing of your interest and support, gives us courage and inspiration.

I am therefore delighted to be here.

I will be using this opportunity to give you

- Some background on Cambodia
- A brief introduction to the state of education in Cambodia
- Some of the problems that teachers face
- What CITA is doing to improve education and teachers pay and conditions
- Some of the challenges of teacher organising in Cambodia
- How we hope to move forward

Cambodia

- Cambodia is one of the poorest countries in the world.
- Life expectancy is 56 and 80% of the population live on less than \$2 a day.
- Cambodia's population is 14 million and is young - 50% of people are under 18 years old.
- Under the Khmer Rouge 195,000 teachers were systematically killed and the education system was largely destroyed.
- The Cambodia People's Party has been in power since 1979 - corruption and human rights abuses are widespread.

- Cambodia is a dangerous place in which to be a trade unionist - members face intimidation, harassment and many union leaders have been killed and attacked.

The Education System

- The quality of education in Cambodia is extremely poor.
- The ratio of students to teachers is high - class sizes are around 50.
- High poverty levels cause high drop out rates, particularly for girls.
- There is a shortage of teachers and schools.
- Teachers are poorly trained with most primary school teachers only having a secondary education.
- Corruption is widespread - headmasters sometimes collect money from pupils or sell exams, lessons, food and even school land.
- Education is crucial to reducing poverty. Around 20% of the national budget is allocated to education and it is a priority for many donors however teachers are excluded or ignored from policy decisions that affect them.
- The Government has set itself the ambitious target that all children will have nine years of free, good quality education by 2015.
- However, poor training, inadequate pay and mistreatment of teachers is a serious threat to education for all.

Problems teachers face

- There are 97,000 teachers in Cambodia - pay is around \$50 US a month which is not enough to cover basic needs particularly with recent dramatic increases in the cost of living.
- CITA's research shows that 54% of teachers have to supplement their income with additional work.
- Teachers' salaries are often paid late with delays of several months.
- Teachers are nervous about joining a trade union and face threats and harassment if they do. CITA members have been forced to resign, been demoted or posted to remote areas.
- Teachers have a low status in society, they are pressurised by head teachers and they lack respect, dignity and voice.
- Cambodian teachers like workers in other sectors have no freedom of association.

How CITA is working to improve the situation

- As all of you in this room know where teachers are well organised they achieve better working conditions and standards of education improve.

CITA is working with teachers and other stakeholders to

- Protect, promote and support the rights of teachers - improving working conditions so that teachers can meet their basic needs and so that teaching becomes a respected job.
- Reform the education sector in Cambodia and ensure teachers interests are integrated into education policy.
- Establish the space for trade unions to operate.

But teacher organising in Cambodia is very challenging

The Cambodian Government is very hostile to unions in general and as a result CITA faces a range of serious challenges, including:

- **Discrimination of members**

Teachers who join the union risk being forced to resign, demoted or posted to remote areas.

- **Police harassment and violence of union activists and meetings**

CITA meetings are regularly broken up by the police.

In October 2005 I was arrested without a warrant for making a statement and imprisoned for 96 days without trial.

- **Exclusion from policy dialogue**

Lack of recognition by the government of CITA deprives us of opportunities to meet with the Department of Education to influence Cambodia's educational system.

Our work continues

Despite limited resources and many difficulties CITA continues to:

- Increase their membership - currently around 10% of all teachers are members and CITA has 19 provincial branches (out of 24 provinces).
- Train and support members.
- Improve the lives and working conditions of teachers - more teachers are now paid on time.
- Develop policy recommendations for reforming the education sector.
- Campaign for freedom of association and expression.

Moving forward

It is a privilege and wonderful opportunity to speak to you and we hope that this will be the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship between CITA and ATL.

Through building solidarity, awareness and fundraising, forming links with teachers and schools, sharing information and campaigning together I'm confident we can help increase quality education in Cambodia which values and respects the teachers that provide it.

We look forward to welcoming you to Cambodia.