

Vietnamese workers' stories a compelling read

Jeff Ballinger | Aug. 29, 2012

ORGANIZING ON SEPARATE SHORES: VIETNAMESE AND VIETNAMESE AMERICAN UNION ORGANIZERS

By Kent Wong and An Le

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This compilation of stories about union organizers in Vietnam and Vietnamese-American union organizers in the United States is both moving and informative. The human drama involved in leading workers out on strike, or cajoling them to risk their precarious livelihoods by joining an organizing committee can hardly be overstated. Add to this the trauma of youths caught up in a war-racked environment and the result is a compelling read.

While unions are not very good at developing a narrative for public consumption, there has always been a cadre of energetic and charismatic front-line brawlers to make the movement an attractive place for activists who want to make change happen.

In *Organizing on Separate Shores*, our interlocutors come from a wide variety of other ?causes.? An appealing aspect of union people, generally speaking, is that they don?t hesitate to extend their anti-authority analysis to their own work situation.

An organizer in the United States, Ho Nhu Lai says, ?There were times when the union really disappointed me.? Xuan-Trang Tran Tien said her early community coalition-building for unions in Seattle was, ?9-1-1 work ... very short-sighted and frustrating.? (No wonder U.S. unions are struggling, she muses.) Xuan-Trang?s organizing experiences quickly improved when she got hooked up with the Washington Federation of State Employees (a crew I?ve heard many good things about) because the federation understood how to build ?real partnerships? with communities of color, the differently-abled, and others.

Ho Nhu Lai came to organizing from the shop floor, incensed that a Campbell Soup foreman forbade him from speaking Vietnamese to fellow workers. After seven years of deboning chicken (what awful work!), he ?immersed [him]self? in the details of his workplace contract, thereby becoming a forceful advocate.

By contrast, it may take decades for the unionists of Vietnam to attain the self-awareness and assuredness of their American brothers and sisters; it?s a steep learning curve, and global capital exploits with alacrity any chink in workers? armor anywhere on the planet.

In my experience, when Taiwanese and South Korean companies came to Vietnam (mid-1990s), signs were encouraging. That?s because when managers were slapping around and berating sports shoe workers, it was extensively reported in the Labor newspaper (the national organ of the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor).

Less than two years later, a woman called Ms. Ha -- the most vocal of the VGCL?s local leaders -- was

sidelined by a government desperate to keep attracting foreign investment in low-skilled manufacturing.

The foregoing suggests a huge challenge for worker-rights advocates in Vietnam: the schizophrenia of a ruling party bent on keeping firm control but delivering a measure of justice to a proud and well-educated populace. Unions must be part of the equation, but just how freely they will operate in society is a balancing act summed up well by organizer Nguyen Ngoc Rau. He described "the power and the resources [unions have] to give advice on the law ... and representing members in court." But he goes on to dismiss this as "only political education, merely words."

The true test, he said, is for workers to see unions as capable of resolving conflict at the worksite itself so that "the workers see that we do what we say we'll do."

This is certainly not an easy task -- even in countries with a century or more of civil society development, independent judiciaries, (mostly) free media and opposition parties.

Chau Nhat Binh, a staff person at the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor's International Department, said, "Most strikes in Vietnam have been wildcat strikes." Unions need to remedy this, he said, as illegal strikes may have serious repercussions for lawbreakers. He was also critical of foreign investors and their record of "paying shockingly low wages ... long hours ... refus[ing] to pay overtime ... and [being] abusive to the workers." Meanwhile, several of his confreres are swept up in an enthusiasm for the new "market economy" and expressed hopes for cooperation with management and acceptance of collective bargaining.

After reading these moving stories, one cannot help but echo the hope expressed by the courageous former Campbell Soup worker who "want[s] to help Vietnamese workers everywhere." One possible way to do this is to follow -- and try to emulate -- the work of a small group of expatriate Vietnamese with offices in Poland and Australia, the Committee to Protect Vietnamese Workers.

Here's my fervent wish: that other university-based labor studies centers will follow the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education's lead by publishing their own compilations: Central American worker-leaders and their U.S.-based brothers and sisters, and perhaps Korean, too.

[Jeff Ballinger is now working for the U.S. Agency for International Development, advising Afghan justice-sector officials in Ghazni Province.]

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"We need to reinvent Labor Day"

By ARTHUR JONES

Jeff Ballinger believes the union movement should rethink Labor Day. He'll not be here for this one, however -- he's in Afghanistan.

"Ballinger? Ballinger?" you might ask. "Don't I know that name?" You might, if you were following the anti-Nike and anti-sweatshop movement in Indonesia and elsewhere in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Ballinger came out of the union movement.

He was in Turkey for the AFL-CIO in the early 1980s, during martial law following a military coup. Unions were banned. His next assignment was Indonesia. American unions had a small office there to help Indonesian workers.

"I joined an expat softball team and three of the guys on my team were from Nike. One of my teammates told me, "I'm your worst nightmare." Ballinger had arrived in Jakarta about the same time the Taiwanese and South Koreans arrived to build huge factories to manufacture sneakers -- i.e., Nike, Adidas and Reebok -- or electronic goods.

"I don't want to sound too naive," Ballinger said, "but, number one, I thought these were American-run factories. The first news article I read in the Indonesian media said Reebok was cutting the daily wage two-and-a-half cents a day, from 86 cents to 83 and a half cents at a Korean-run factory. They thought they could get away with it. The workers rose up in anger, and the Koreans backed off. They were getting squeezed by the big buyers, like Reebok, Adidas and Nike, and they were passing the pain along to the workers."

Ballinger entered the fray. He got some USAID money to monitor the 86-cent compliance and started a nongovernmental organization, Press for Change, to highlight the exploitation.

Said Ballinger, "The majority of companies were paying the lowest they could get away with and still have the workers come in the following day." He toured some Indonesian sneaker factory workers around the United States to raise awareness.

A decade later he hasn't changed his tune much. He told *The New York Times* in February that the Fair Labor Association was "largely a fig leaf." The 1999-founded association, the child of 200 universities and nonprofits plus corporations such as Nike and Liz Claiborne, wanted to end the sweatshop accusations. The Fair Labor Association has inspected some 1,300 factories in Asia and Latin America.

Ballinger said, "There's all this rhetoric about corporate social responsibility people and the big companies that they want to improve labor standards, but all the pressure seems to be going in the other direction -- they're trying to force prices down."

The association contended in the *Times* it had exposed some of the worst abuses.

Meanwhile, Ballinger in Afghanistan reflects on U.S. labor's needs back home.

He wants organized labor to bring back a variation on old union-organizing slogan, "Thanks for the use of your hall." Time was in the labor movement that organizers often had nowhere to meet. They'd canvas other groups seeking space.

Take that concept to the social media, Ballinger suggests. "We have to look at the "hall" differently. Unions have to go Internet savvy, to MoveOn.org, or Change.org, asking, "Can we use your hall?" saying, "We need some solidarity, some place to give a talk to our potential members." To make that our goal we need to reinvent Labor Day."

But that requires more than words. Asked where he gets his motivation, Ballinger provided a 1983 *New York Times* headline covering his law school class' graduation: "Justice Blackmun Tells New Lawyers 'Take Risks.'"

[Arthur Jones is *NCR* books editor.]

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