

## Chapter 12

### East Timor erupts

As Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA expanded its role and influence in the Asia-Pacific, it was challenged throughout the mid-90s over its failure to support the most high-profile liberation struggle in the region – East Timor. The massacre by Indonesian troops of more than 200 East Timorese during a peaceful march to the Santa Cruz cemetery on November 12, 1991, had galvanised the solidarity movement within Australia and led unions across the country to become heavily involved. Despite the loss of life, former human rights investigator Elisabeth de Iino De Araujo, whose brother was wounded in the attack, says the massacre was a key factor in East Timor's fight for freedom. "If 12 November 1991 had not happened there would be no independence, that is my belief," she says, because "it opened international eyes that something was wrong in East Timor".<sup>i</sup>

However, the agency faced a Catch 22 in trying to work in East Timor says Hazelton "because it was under Indonesian control and we couldn't go in directly as Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA, due to restrictions placed on international NGOs at the time". By 1998 the political situation appeared to brighten with the removal of Indonesia's hardline President Soeharto from office. The new Habibie Government in Jakarta was in the mood for compromise on East Timor, pushed in part by the growing *Reformasi* movement within Indonesia and the collapse of the

Indonesian economy, which had a devastating impact on the drought-stricken East Timor. As Sister Josephine Mitchell from the Mary MacKillop Institute noted after a visit in early 1998:

*"We travelled through regions where villages were experiencing extreme scarcity of food, bordering on starvation. We were also aware of a general food shortage almost everywhere we went due to the drought, crop failure and the economic downturn. In just one district of East Timor, the parish priest told us 20,000 people are suffering severe hunger. In the neighbouring district he says 85 people have died of starvation. The story is similar in other districts where people are trying to survive only on sago."*

In 1998, after an approach by Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA member and activist Peter Murphy and the Timorese independence movement in Australia, the agency found a way to start support, and partnered with the Mary MacKillop Institute in Sydney in their East Timorese Studies program. The institute, which as an agency of the Catholic Church was already on the ground, was doing work on literacy in local languages. An appeal was launched to raise funds for food and medical supplies as drought put food production under pressure. In preparation for the anticipated referendum on independence, Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA assisted in planning and training for a post-independence health system – partly based on its work with the ANC. Importantly East Timor project officer Alison Tate took seven or eight groups of union leaders on one-week-long study tours to the impoverished nation, "so when the troubles did all hit at the end of 1999 there was a significant number of key union officials in Australia who had an understanding of the situation, had been to Timor, could relate to it all and understood that the people were yearning for independence, so were very much on side and very supportive".

During the first of these tours, Tate travelled from Dili to Jakarta with Unions NSW assistant secretary Chris Christodoulou and CFMEU Victoria head John Cummins to Indonesia to meet with Timorese independence leader Xanana Gusmao. "We met with Xanana Gusmao who was still under house arrest in Indonesia and just by chance it was the week Jose Ramos Horta was allowed back into Indonesia," she recalls. "So we arrived on a day in Xanana's house when his nephew was getting married, they had a meeting with us, an ACTU union delegation and they were preparing for that week the pro-independence, pro-autonomy peace talks in Jakarta under the Indonesian Government's facilitation. So it was a huge week, but when we met Jose Ramos Horta and Xanana Gusmao in Xanana's house where he was being held, they were really amazed and overwhelmed and grateful for the physical presence of union leaders representing solidarity and union support for the independence movement." The significance of the meeting was recognised on both sides as Tate recalls: "I remember meeting Gusmao sometime later at Australia's Parliament House and he commented on the importance of that day and how dramatic it was."

The early work in East Timor placed the agency in a strong position to help after the August 30, 1999, vote for independence unleashed a wave of violence by Indonesian-backed militias against the people. CFMEU observer Liam Phelan arrived by ferry from West Timor into Dili on the night of the vote. *"We pulled into Dili wharf after midnight. It was packed. A sea of bodies swarmed below, all desperately trying to get out. Voices shouted as people held bags, mattresses and even furniture above their heads and tried to squash themselves up the gangways. As I stepped from the terminal ... there was three or four rounds of gunfire immediately behind me<sup>ii</sup>. The militia had attacked the terminal and were terrorising those trying to get out."* Elisabeth De Araujo, who worked as an electoral official on the day, says the East Timorese knew their vote for independence would cost them and planned to flee after

casting their vote. "At the time everyone was really happy for the vote, but with a face that was concerned, 'After vote, where you go? – they all asked that, meaning where will you escape?'" De Araujo stayed in Dili as the UN team began to tally the votes. "Before the announcement I knew we were going to win, because during the counting process I was there," she says. "I was so excited, I came back home to my family and said 'We're going to win, but what's going to happen to us I don't know'."

That question would be answered on September 5, the day after the UN announced the ballot results. Then at her sister's home, De Araujo witnessed the militia gangs marching through Dili. "For the first time in my life since I was involved as an activist I saw with my own eyes the militia shot my mum's auntie – they shot her until she died. I said to my cousin we have to move, we can't stay here, so we just escaped into the mountain." As De Araujo waited in the mountains a wave of Indonesian-backed militia violence swept through East Timor, especially the capital, Dili, where most of the city's public buildings were destroyed and thousands killed. In Australia the labour movement and civil society organisations piled pressure on the Howard Government to send in troops to end the murder.

Jennings says Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA's work with union leaders manifested itself in a concerted campaign to press the Howard Government, under the auspices of the UN, to stop the violence. "The number of rallies and marches was amazing," he says. The CFMEU played a major role in harnessing Australian public emotion. This kicked off on 8 September when about 4000 workers, mainly CFMEU members from building sites in Sydney, walked off the job and swelled the ranks of the first rally.

The CFMEU was joined by a number of other unions. Garbage workers - with the full support of Randwick Council - refused to pick up garbage from the Indonesian consulate. Printing workers refused to handle paper products made in Indonesia. The Australian Nurses Federation declared its support for all the continuing actions and announced it had placed members on stand-by to go to East Timor if required. The Australian Education Union urged public schools to observe two minutes' silence at midday on Tuesday, 7 September. The NSW and ACT Independent Education Union resolved to support the CFMEU and other unions in their actions. The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) prevented the loading of cargo on all Indonesia-bound ships. The freighter Bunga Teratia III was delayed in Port Botany until its owner agreed not to transport 16 cargo containers bound for Indonesia. In Newcastle port, the Cape Horn was prevented from loading produce bound for Indonesia. In Brisbane, the Chekiang was not allowed to leave until 30 containers headed for Indonesia were unloaded. In Melbourne, \$22 million worth of products were left stranded. In Adelaide, the MUA took 20 containers to a warehouse and declared they would not be released until Timor Leste was free.<sup>iii</sup>

The International Transport Workers Federation called on its 500 affiliates around the world to follow the MUA's example and "organise appropriate protest action against Indonesian commercial interests, including air and sea traffic coming from or bound for Indonesian ports and airports". At a special ACTU meeting, unions were urged to place bans on all Indonesian government and commercial interests in Australia. In Melbourne, rank-and-file anger had taken the union leadership by surprise – Leigh Hubbard, secretary of the Victorian Trades Hall Council, said "a lot of these members are ahead of the leadership on this one". At Melbourne airport, passengers travelling to Indonesia were prevented by construction workers from boarding a Garuda Airlines flight. The CFMEU's Victorian leadership signalled its intention to take similar action against other Garuda flights until the violence in East Timor ended. The

union also informed Qantas it would oppose any attempt to take on displaced Garuda passengers. The Australian Services Union declared it was also imposing bans on Garuda Airlines. The Transport Workers Union banned the loading of all Indonesian-bound freight at Melbourne airport, despite threats of employment reprisals. For instance, Qantas staff in Melbourne were warned they could be prosecuted under the Workplace Relations Act and the Trade Practices Act if they refused to handle or delayed the loading of Garuda freight. Staff responded by intensifying their actions.<sup>iv</sup>

Defiance was spreading throughout the union movement. The Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union, which also represents postal workers, imposed national bans on all mail, telecommunication services, and fault repairs to the Indonesian consulate and Indonesian businesses. The Australian Workers Union stepped up the pressure, telling BP, Caltex and Shell not to order Indonesian oil because its members would refuse to process it. The Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia agreed to support the campaign to stop the violence. It called for all state and federal instrumentalities, including the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games and the Sydney Paralympic Organising Committee, and all companies manufacturing in Indonesia, to suspend contracts immediately.<sup>v</sup>

As the public rallies escalated in size and anger, the Howard government began to work frantically to pressure Indonesia to allow foreign troops into the smouldering island. With Indonesian approval on September 20, the International Force for East Timor, led by Australian Major General Peter Cosgrove entered Dili. Hazelton, who was then on the ACFOA Board, was in Darwin waiting to go to East Timor to assess the situation. He was among the first foreigners to witness the destruction: "There was lots of smoke, still blood on the walls, people

wandering back into town among the smoke looking for their families ... it was a shocking situation."

The outpouring of public support from the Australian union movement in the wake of the militia violence in East Timor was extraordinary. And it was matched financially and materially – by the end of 1999 more than \$200,000 had been raised through emergency appeals while a number of unions collaborated with Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA on longer-term development programs. These included the Australian Nursing Federation for medical training for community health workers; the CFMEU for constructing emergency shelters and rebuilding houses, and later, with support from the Australian Building Industry, constructing a \$200,000 vocational training centre known as the *Knua Buka Hatene* (place of learning in Tetum); the Australian Education Union and Independent Education Union helping to re-establish the educational system and supporting teacher and vocational training; the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union assisting the CNRT to establish its own radio station, and the Australian Services Union for office skills training and supply of computer systems.

Then ACTU President Sharan Burrow, who is now general secretary of the global International Trade Union Confederation, says Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA enabled the labour movement to express practically its support for the East Timorese. "The labour movement has always had a commitment to sovereignty and the right of people to choose their own destiny," she says. "East Timor was just one of those pieces of injustice ... and Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA was a great tool to be able to say the Australian labour movement cares and we will help you make the difference you want to make in terms of the development of your country."<sup>vi</sup>

The support from the union movement needed careful monitoring, so less than three months after De Araujo fled her home, Ramona Mitussis, from the Civil Service Association of Western Australia, landed in Dili to establish Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA's East Timor office. "As in Cambodia it was very hard work and quite risky for the initial staff we sent," says Hazelton. "It was a small place and it was very damaged and ... there was a lot of work to do in helping support the establishment of a structure for government."

Soon afterwards, during a tour of Australia, East Timorese independence leader Xanana Gusmao acknowledged the work of the union movement and Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA: *"I commend the Australian union movement and its humanitarian aid agency Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA for your solidarity and support to our independence struggle and your ongoing commitment to supporting us in developing health, education, reconstruction and human rights programs."*

While Indonesia's *Reformasi* movement was important in creating the conditions for East Timor's ballot on independence, within the country it also created a window for the organisation of workers. Under the Suharto regime, workers or activists who attempted to organise independently were harassed, jailed or killed. Democratic union structures were repressed and instead state-sponsored official unions were promoted and controlled by the military. The collapse of the Suharto dictatorship led Indonesia's new government to sign ILO convention No 87, which gives workers with the right to join trade unions.

The ACTU was eager for Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA to help our near neighbour in its transition toward an independent trade union movement, as ACTU international officer Alan Matheson noted at the time: "Australian unions, through their international sector union

organisations, are increasingly active in their support of the Indonesian worker struggle. The priority of this support is to develop and strengthen industry-based enterprise union organisations as a first step towards a fully democratic and representative union movement in Indonesia."

By mid-1999 Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA had established a partnership with the Legal Aid Institute and in February 2000 the new Indonesian Labour Education Centre was launched in Bandung to train union activists and organisers.

This work ran counter to former chair Cliff Dolan's insistence that the agency stay away from union business. While from its earliest days Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA had close ties with union movements in various countries, the focus was always on supporting the health, administrative and skills training programs of the unions rather than organising and trade union training.

In South Africa, for example, from 1991 Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA worked with COSATU developing its skills grading systems – a vital issue given many black South Africans had no formal qualifications. Under the Bantu education system, black people were largely denied a meaningful education and were instead viewed as cheap low-skilled labour. As part of the democratisation process, the union movement aimed to develop a work skills grading system so workers with no official qualifications but years of experience could have channels for training and promotion available to them. This was an important contribution to raising the wages and opportunities of black workers and a key part of COSATU's work in raising the living standards of the black majority. Adrienne Bird from the South African metalworkers union visited Australia as part of this program with Australian union trainers Alistair Machin

and Chris Lloyd of the Australian Metal Workers Union and Kate McLear, of the National Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union, travelling to South Africa in late 1992 to provide technical advice on the new system.

Cambodia country co-ordinator Barbara Fitzgerald recalls that as late as 1994 the ACTU was resistant to the idea of Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA supporting the development of unions. That year she addressed the ACTU international committee to try to get support for Cambodian unions, but says the peak body maintained the view that Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA should do the international humanitarian work and the ACTU would do the international union work. But this was not a view that could last, and Hazelton points out that by the mid-90s the world was a different place with the collapse of the Soviet Union heralding the end of the Cold War internationally and reducing the Left-Right divisions within the labour movement in Australia.

Ultimately Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA's connections through its humanitarian work made it an obvious choice to support union training programs in the countries where it was based. This change in policy opened the door to ground-breaking development work in Cambodia, helping the Vietnamese and Lao trade union movements adapt to new economies and establishing a labour movement in East Timor and Indonesia. It was also the catalyst for closer affiliations at an international level leading to joint projects with the International Labour Organisation and partnerships with European trade unions and labour movement agencies.

The move into union training was an easy step to make, given Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA's partner organisations in its development work were often from the labour movement. But the genesis for this work was in a wave of strikes by young female Cambodian garment factory workers in 1997, angered by their poor working conditions, long hours and extremely low pay.

In response three new unions were established in competition with the Cambodia Federation of Independent Trade Unions: the CUF (Cambodian Union Federation), the NIFTUC (National Independent Federation of Textile Unions of Cambodia) and the FTUWKC (Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia). Union training was non-existent at this point in Cambodia and there was little expertise in-country on which the new unions could draw. In December 1998, through a joint project with the Japan International Co-operation Agency, union trainer Kate McLear, who was national education officer of the Textiles, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia, led a three-week course training four future trainers from each of the four unions, half of the participants were women. The impact of this training was enhanced during 1999 and 2000 when Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA, with funding again from Japan, conducted a series of Sunday Labour Seminars: Empowerment of Women Garment Workers. These seminars were led by the 16 trainers trained by McLear with an outreach to 1000 garment workers on issues such as: what is a union; benefits of a union; gender rights; and negotiation skills.

These first union training courses attracted the attention of the ILO, which was just beginning to take an interest in Cambodia's fledgling unions, with an ILO representative attending the McLear training. In the wake of this experience, the ILO set up its own union training program, consulting with Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA on its establishment and following the agency's policy of working with all existing unions. While Barbara Fitzgerald was protective of the work Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA had done, she was also pragmatic about the takeover; "ILO had the funding from Nordic countries to do it. We didn't," she says.

East Timor, like Cambodia, had little existing structure on which to build a labour movement with only token teachers' and nurses' unions in the country when it was under Indonesian rule.

The strength of the Australian union movement's involvement in Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA's early work in the new country filled this void in some respects – with the agency's union volunteers taking up causes from OH&S issues to media skills development and literacy training. Among the first unions to sponsor this work were the Australian Education Union, the Australian Nursing Federation, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, the Australian Workers Union, the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union, the Community and Public Sector Union, the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, the Independent Education Union, the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union and the Maritime Union of Australia.

The arrival in East Timor of Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA volunteer Jim Mellor in early January 2000 brought the problem of asbestos to the fore. Mellor, who was in the country to develop community radio, had a background in the CFMEU and was well aware of the dangers of asbestos. He could see a disaster in the making, as the destruction of Dili by militias had left a trail of asbestos-built homes in smouldering ruins and collapse, which at that point were being literally swept up with no protections. Mellor began working with the World Bank to develop a protocol for the safe removal of asbestos. It was an approach not appreciated by many. As Jennings recalls: "It caused a bit of angst and didn't make us popular because all the NGOs are in emergency let's go, flat out [mode] and Jim's there going, 'Hang on, hang on, that's asbestos. If you don't want problems down the track you've got to get rid of it safely'. Some NGOs felt we were being a bit of an obstacle trying to bring this protocol in, but in the final analysis it will pay off." Mellor's work was later supported by a Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA project led by CFMEU asbestos expert Ron Westrupp, who trained two East Timorese teams in safe asbestos removal.

Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA was again on the front foot for local workers in two disputes, with Ramona Mitsussis and Mellor helping staff of one international aid agency take strike action over the agency's poor pay rates, failure to pay travel allowance and provide free drinking water. As Jennings notes; "The US-based international aid agency was very upset by the strike, but also very embarrassed ... and so they should have been." Likewise when staff on the ship moored in Dili Harbour that doubled as accommodation for foreign workers alerted Mellor and Mitsussis to their working conditions, they helped to organise a picket and international media coverage for their plight.

These initial interventions strongly reflected the importance Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA placed on nurturing labour rights and workers' health during the early development of the country. As Jennings notes "defending workers, when workers are being screwed – that is important in any country". One of the agency's initial partners on these issues was the Labour Advocacy Institute for East Timor (LAIFET) – tasked with working on a labour code for the new country. In January 2001 Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA funded a week-long workshop that led to the formation of an interim national trade union body – Confederacao Trabhalador Timor Lorosa'e, which later became the Trade Union Confederation of Timor Lorosae (KSTL). A nine-member council reflected the nine industrial sectors present at the initial workshop – teachers, agricultural workers, nurses, construction workers, carpenters, journalists, hotel workers, doctors and dockworkers.

Jennings says the KSTL has had its wins, including a labour code that is "better than ours". "One of the key things it [did], was sit down with the government and negotiate a very good labour code. Given the business sector in the country wasn't co-ordinated at that stage, the

major input to the government was coming from the union side not the business side, so they've got a very good labour code. They've got the right to strike, for example, which we don't have."

As the peak body began its initial work in establishing unions across the sectors, Darwin-based Miscellaneous Workers Union member Didge McDonald moved to Dili in August 2002 as part of a project funded through the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions' Asia Pacific Regional Office, the MUA and the LHMU. He cut quite a figure – a "bear of a man" is how Jennings describes him, striding around Dili in his shorts and work boots. "They still talk about Didge being a bit like the father of the union movement ... he was very good in that mentoring role in setting up unions and the structures unions should have to make sure there is good financial accountability and good records."

Some of the development work in East Timor partly mirrored the work done in democratising structures in South Africa. Many older workers, who had not had the benefit of tertiary or secondary education, felt locked out of promotion as younger university-educated workers raced past them on pay grades. However the KSTL was instrumental in establishing a public sector union and codifying the value of experience versus education on the six employment levels. "This helped a lot of older workers to feel they were being valued and not left behind," says Jennings.

Didge McDonald's strong OH&S background meant safety remained a central tenet of unions' focus in East Timor. Two later developments that sprang from this focus were the establishment of an occupational health and safety unit within the peak body and the launch of a Working Women's Centre to organise domestic workers. "In many cases domestic workers have no rights, no fixed wage, no contract and they're vulnerable to sexual harassment and

abuse," says Jennings. The Working Women's Centre helped codify their rights and develop a common contract that outlined the responsibilities of employers.

Consultation with the domestic workers threw up some surprises and shows workers' rights and training have many side issues. "A lot of the women had grown up in a mountain village where there is no electricity," says Jennings. "They would go to work in a house in Dili and be told to put these dirty clothes in a washing machine and they've never seen a washing machine in their lives and they don't know how to use it or plug the iron in and iron this shirt and they didn't know what to do. The Working Women's Centre held several workshops with the young women to find out what they wanted and it wasn't just a decent wage, no sexual harassment and decent hours of employment and the right to go to school and not to have to work all day – but they also wanted to be shown how to use an iron."

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<sup>i</sup> De Araujo, Elisabeth. & Cooper, Dani. & APHEDA-Union Aid Abroad. & National Library of Australia. *Elisabeth de Araujo interviewed by Dani Cooper in the Union Aid Abroad APHEDA (Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad) oral history project*. Quotes by de Araujo throughout the book are taken from this oral history interview and follow-up interviews.

<sup>ii</sup> Phelan, Liam. 'One year on, lessons of the past ignored.' *East Timor: Making Amends?* Ed Taudevin, L and Lee, J. Otford Press. 2000. Print.

<sup>iii</sup> Fernandes, Clinton. *Reluctant Saviour: Indonesia and the Independence of East Timor*. Scribe Publications. 2005.

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid*

<sup>v</sup> *ibid*

<sup>vi</sup> Burrow, Sharan. & Cooper, Dani. & APHEDA-Union Aid Abroad. & National Library of Australia. *Sharan Burrow interviewed by Dani Cooper in the Union Aid Abroad APHEDA (Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad) oral history project*. Burrow throughout the book are taken from this oral history interview and follow-up interviews.