

## **FREE EAST TIMOR!**

This is the story of how Australian trade unions helped liberate East Timor from Indonesian occupation. It is a story of people power, how ordinary Australians forced our Government to do the right thing for a small neighbour in need. In this story I am concentrating on the contribution of workers and unions to the campaign in Sydney, because that is where I was involved.

In 1999 I was an official of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), the main trade union in the construction industry. By 1999 East Timor had already suffered through nearly 25 years of cruel and illegal military occupation by its giant neighbour Indonesia. But this situation was about to change.

In early 1999 Indonesia's President offered the people of East Timor a referendum, where they could vote to either stay a part of Indonesia or to become an independent country. The ordinary people of East Timor had suffered terribly at the hands of the Indonesian army, with torture and murder of dissidents widespread. Most East Timorese people wanted independence and a small guerrilla war against the occupiers had widespread support.

The Indonesian army was the main power on the ground in East Timor - it set about defying its own President's wishes and intimidating the people of East Timor into voting against independence at the upcoming referendum. It did this by establishing a proxy army of militias, made up of gangsters and drug addicts that it could control.

Then the army unleashed these militias on the civilian population. The horror that followed was covered by Australian and international media, who were in East Timor to cover the lead-up to the referendum.

Many, perhaps most ordinary Australians had always opposed Indonesia's occupation of East Timor. The Government however, influenced by big business, had supported the original invasion and given aid and comfort to the Indonesian Government on the subject ever since.

The graphic images of murder and mayhem by the militias that filled Australian TV screens night after night really motivated many ordinary Australians to get active about freedom for East Timor for the first.

The union I was working for was also galvanised. The union had always been active in support of the East Timorese people, but the public revulsion at the images coming from East Timor motivated the leadership to step up its efforts.

Many CFMEU members are of Portuguese descent. Portuguese-Australians dominate the concreting and carpentry/formwork sectors of the building industry. There are strong family and cultural ties between East Timor and Portugal.

The strong advocacy of Portuguese building workers over the deteriorating situation in East Timor convinced the leadership of the CFMEU that emotion in support of the East Timorese was strong on building sites and could be harnessed into a campaign.

In mid-August of 1999 the referendum was held and the results announced. Despite massive intimidation by the militias, nearly 80 per cent of the East Timorese voted for independence.

Very quickly after the announcement however, Indonesian militias began to burn towns and deport hundreds of thousands of East Timorese people across the border into West Timor (also a part of Indonesia). The situation had become critical. The UN, US and the international community were all looking to the Australian Government, which was were sitting on their hands. The Australian people would have to act to force our Government to send our troops in to free East Timor.

A huge coalition of organisations were active on the issue, everyone from the Commando Association to the Catholic Church to the union movement were united in the need to campaign quickly to get our troops in.

On the Wednesday after the referendum announcement, and as East Timor burnt, hundreds of activists from more than 80 organisations met at our union office in Kent Street Sydney to plan a campaign. The CFMEU offered a "campaign room" with phones and photocopiers, so that rallies and protests could be centrally co-ordinated. The small East Timorese community in Sydney was contacted and hurried plans were made.

And so the campaign began.

In two weeks we held seven major rallies, the biggest, held in Hyde Park, attracted 30,000 people. We held rallies at night, we held rallies at lunchtime. Perhaps 10,000 building workers in Sydney made a conscious decision to lose pay and stop work to attend the rallies. Many, many other unions also made huge contributions.

We hired buses and brought 300 East Timorese -Australians to Sydney International Airport. They were joined by nearly 700 of our members who were working on an expansion of the airport, and together we stopped a Garuda (Indonesian Airlines) plane from taking off for more than 5 hours. This action alone would have cost the Indonesian Government a lot of money.

Australian unionists alongside East Timorese living in Sydney also blockaded the office of Garuda in Sydney for 5 days – completely shutting it down so that they boarded up their office and didn't reopen for nearly two weeks.

We were engaging in civil disobedience, causing some Sydneysiders inconvenience with endless marches and occupations, but most people were understanding, in fact most were supportive.

After about 10 days of constant pressure, the Prime Minister announced that Australian troops would go to East Timor under UN auspices and that the Indonesian army, who had caused so much suffering, would leave.

We had won! We had forced our Government to liberate a country under occupation. The PM tried to make political capital out of his back flip, because he knew how popular the Australian intervention into East Timor was with the average Australian. But it didn't matter. We knew that the Government had no plan for a liberation mission in East Timor, but that we had forced them to make a plan very quickly.

Trade Unions exist to protect and improve wages and conditions for working people. But trade unions also play a wider role in trying to make our world a better place. The CFMEU made a great contribution to the East Timor campaign, and has also helped to end apartheid in South Africa and contributed massively to the peace campaign to stop the war in Iraq.

Today East Timor is a very poor country. Australian trade unions did not hesitate to assist the people of East Timor to rebuild their shattered country following their liberation. More than 75 per cent of buildings had been torched and destroyed in the lead up to the Independence vote.

One of the most significant contributions made by the CFMEU in conjunction with the ACTU's international aid organization Union Aid Abroad - APHEDA was to build a Vocational Education Centre in Dili. The CFMEU and APHEDA raised funds for the Centre, supported by 14 companies and industry bodies.

Union Aid Abroad - APHEDA designed this project to also build the capacity of East Timorese carpenters who gained valuable skills learning on the work site while construction was undertaken. These carpenters have gone on to form workers co-operatives and now operate very successful workshops. The funding provided by trade unions for development in East Timor has also gone towards buying specialist equipment for these carpenters. Just from this exercise, 61 households have a source of income and their children are able to go to school.

The Vocational Education Centre, called Knua Buka Ilatene ("community place of learning" in Tetun) is run by three local Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and provides a range of training for women, the poor and ex-combatants. These include literacy classes and courses in tailoring, carpentry, and small business management. Up to January 2005, more than 3,000 people have been trained at the Centre, acknowledged today as a leading provider of vocational education in East Timor.

The unions in Australia have also contributed to the development of workers' rights in East Timor through supporting the growth of the new nation's trade union council, otherwise known as Konfederasaun Sindikatu Timor Leste, or KSTL. It is undertaking the huge task of educating workers about their rights, and advocating these rights at the national level.

Union Aid Abroad - APHEDA has been working actively on the ground in East Timor with the support of various donors, including the Australian unions, to help build the capacity of the people to face the challenges of developing their new nation. On top of providing financial assistance, APHEDA has facilitated the placement of union members with specific skills to help local partners, and provided mentoring, evaluation and monitoring services.

Life remains tough for most East Timorese people.

But at least they are free.

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