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Melody Kemp



WSS Recently you were part of an international OHS inspection team in Indonesia. Can you tell us about that?

MK I guess the reason I became part of the team was that I was known to the social research group that we were working with. First, Reebok, who we were working for, put the job out for tender, which was actually quite unusual. Normally the other shoe companies tend to elect an international consulting accounting firm like Price Waterhouse or Ernst Young. The woman who took over the human rights job used to work for the Asian Foundation and she had a totally different set of beliefs. She had a background in social activism and human rights, so she was interested in a different approach. Being as independent as they could be they decided to take this opportunity. They subcontracted to a prominent social research group who have worked for World Bank and have a lot of status.

Also, they were all Indonesians while I was the only foreigner on the team but I also speak Indonesian. A major factor was that we were all familiar with the language and culture. They needed an OHS person, they preferred to work with a woman, and I was the only woman they could find in Indonesia with that mix of skills.

WSS Was international pressure the main motivator for Reebok to undertake this?

MK It was international pressure; there wasn't any internal pressure. Pressure is generally from outside the corporate organisation. It's not from inside because people really need the jobs. Companies like Reebok and Nike are seen by the rest of the world as Satan-on-wheels, Indonesians see these places as luxurious workplaces with a very high status.

Working for Nike and other internationally known brands carries a lot of status. That being said there are some serious problems with working conditions. When I went there I found some serious breaches, like chemical exposure, using isocyanates and ergonomics were bad. Also the code of conduct they had at the time excluded things like ergonomics and excluded a lot of what I call the backroom people, boiler attendants, welders, the guys who make the moulds, even the office staff.

I said to Reebok, and I'm sure they won't mind me saying this; I will only take the job if I can include those issues. Seeing that the majority of the workforce is women, I was going to put in a lot of stuff about the gender aspect of occupational health, such as when a lot of pregnant women are

standing all day, a lot of pregnant women sitting on chairs with unsupported backs. There are women working with solvent exposure. So I took a fairly gender-specific line on it as well.

Amazing things happened. One week I would be walking around with the human rights team, pointing out deficiencies, the next week would have people waiting in the car park to show me the improvements that they had introduced. The changes that they had put in place in a week were pretty impressive.

When I first went to Reebok, they said that I could walk around on my own. I said that I want as many people as possible around me, I want to look like I was an important person. And I also wanted them to see with my eyes, what's happening in the factory.

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My language skills allowed me to directly identify problems and ask them what they saw. I think my efforts there were sustainable as I was teaching them a problem-solving model. And I was teaching a consultative model on how to work with workers. By the end of my time, they believed that workers were experts on their working environments. They could be trusted to give good quality information.

For example, they could report that the reason they turned the lights off was not that they were pissed off, disloyal or naughty or negligent, but that the lights made their work area too hot. There were rational reasons for everything they did. In Indonesian culture, that's a pretty big thing, it's a very big shift to make.

WSS Is the OHS training you have provided this year a direct consequence of the monitoring last year?

MK It wasn't a direct flow on from that specifically. The whole issue of labour monitoring has worried a lot of people from the States and myself, because we felt that it wasn't sustainable. It was bypassing local people, again with the accounting firms coming in. Even though I speak the local language I would ultimately leave and the program could fail. What we needed to do was train a group of people in that country who could continue the program. All of us agree, I think, that what we did was still not enough, and also the labour monitors, the people we trained, don't have the support of organisations and so they are incredibly vulnerable.

We all thought this was a good excuse to start teaching labour activist and worker representatives about occupational health.

The whole aid and technical assistance area has largely avoided the labour area and keep dumping it in the lap of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) so it is not allowing the development of a systematic program.

One of the big problems with this dreadful thing called Globalisation, which is like Kali and has thousands of arms, is that it has the propensity to create and destroy

WSS You mention a term "majority world". What do you mean by that?

MK I always think that "Third World" is diminutive and says that we haven't anything to learn from them. I have spent the last 12 years learning an enormous lot from the Majority World. They are in the majority; we in the Western World are the minority. We consumers, with our 3 cars and our mobile phones are the minority.

WSS What can the Minority World learn from your work?

MK One of the big problems with this dreadful thing called Globalisation, which is like Kali and has

thousands of arms, is that it has the propensity to create and destroy. Recently I was discussing globalisation and I wondered what we are actually talking about. Are we talking about globalisation of trade, of economics, of culture or of information? The argument changes for each one of them.

It is important in the globalisation of trade that we work very closely with the Third World because there is a race to the bottom. One of the unfortunate things is that the workers of the world are seeing each other as opposition and as competitors and not as allies in a fight for fairness and justice. This is an area where all of us can work together for the social justice, for the workers everywhere in the world. What we do in the Third World has an important rebound effect in the Minority World because we are finally saying to Corporations that you can't keep getting away with this, you can't keep going offshore and doing your worst there. It's the old Solidarity model really. I am an unashamed leftie but we forget to use the old terminology, as it's all a bit embarrassing. Solidarity work and working together is really important but we have to realise that the old thing about workers uniting should not be forgotten because Corporations are important and have Government in their pockets.

WSS Trade Unions have been talking globally for over a century. Is the fact that you have found bad working conditions in Indonesia an indication that the campaign and effort has failed?

MK I think that's right but there are cultural elements. If you are

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talking to someone about noise-induced hearing loss five or ten years down the line, you're talking to people whose daily planning horizon is their next meal. So there is always an incredible disjuncture between what we talk about as risk management to what in the Majority World is an everyday reality, which is simply them trying to feed their kids and to keep their jobs in an incredibly competitive world.

Indonesia has 40 million unemployed. It's difficult to get your head around that number of people.

The fight is for better pay because Indonesia's revised minimum wage, in Jakarta, covers only 80% of the subsistence cost for a single male. So, the fight is always for wages to achieve a level of food security. We shouldn't get too idealistic and forget that.

I tell these guys that "I understand your struggle, but you have to be alive to earn that wage. You have to be healthy to earn that wage. If you are injured, it is not only you; it's your whole family who's injured. How many people do you have hanging off your wage?"

WSS Is there the risk of imposing Western values on their decisions and activities?

MK Yes, in a way the whole corporate responsibility thing is a new wave of colonialism. There is an influx of people saying to companies that you have to have corporate responsibility when the country doesn't even have law and order. This is the message I am taking with me to Geneva tomorrow. I think it is really silly when people are being burnt alive in the streets for theft, we are talking about corporate

responsibility. The country has no rule of law and no faith in their institutions.

In Indonesia, people are starting to get interested in OHS. In the Philippines there has been a longer timeframe and they are very interested in occupational health. In Vietnam, when I was there a few years ago, they were really interested in OHS. It's part of our own self-respect.

Sixteen workers died building the Jakarta Grand Hyatt. As far as I know, very few people died making shoes

WSS Is there a principle motivator in Indonesia to improve safety levels?

MK Indonesia is a country of 210 million people. It has four occupational hygienists, only one of whom is working as a hygienist. Indonesia's labour inspectors are paid so badly that they can't survive on the wage. The only way they can survive is by taking bribes and/or working another job. I worked in the Ministry of Manpower. I would arrive at six in the morning; others would arrive at 10, read the paper, have a snooze, use the phone for private business and then leave. When I was pushy and dragged them out into factories, they got pissed off with me because that was getting in the way of their income. Also, when they took me out with them, they couldn't

accept the bribes. Well they did, but I had to look the other way.

I don't approve of the bribes but I understand it. Fundamentally, Indonesia doesn't have a culture of safety. I don't think there's a culture of risk. Indonesia does have a feudal culture where people have been de-motivated for taking responsibility and initiative. Yet, OHS is underpinned by accountability and responsibility. None of those things exist in Indonesia for a whole set of cultural and political reasons, but they are starting to develop.

Recently I wrote a conference paper with Garrett entitled Neighbourhood Watch because I feel we have an enormous OHS responsibility to our neighbourhood. It's the responsibility of mentoring, of establishing communication links with people. It's not Government aid of billions of dollars but it is the recognition that our neighbours are just getting the glimmerings of what it might mean to have occupational health and safety.



WSS Shoe manufacturing has had considerable media attention. What is the next industry that needs such attention?

MK I would focus on the international hotel industry. Sixteen workers died building the Jakarta Grand Hyatt. As far

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as I know, very few people died making shoes. But workers do die from building Hyatts, Hiltons, and Four Seasons and yet nobody has touched that industry.

The cigarette industry. One cigarette company in East Java employed 43,000 women in one factory. On top of that were 2,800 males as Supervisors. These sorts of numbers blow your mind. A polyclinic there sees 1200 workers a day. There are two doctors and a couple of



nurses, and I managed a sneak look at the casebook before they slammed it shut. The major health issue there was gynaecological disturbances and abortions because nicotine dermally absorbed is an abortifacient. Everyone talks of the cigarette industry as a public health risk; no one is particularly interested in it as an occupational health risk. And of course, who's going to take action against a factory that employs 43,000 people?

I feel a bit cynical about the corporate responsibility issue because it is very reactive and it only does respond to the jar that makes the loudest noise. It's not necessarily based around mortality or epidemiology. The shoe industry is a good target because it is high profile.

WSS How was your book "Working For Life" received around the world?

MK It's been incredibly well received. The Asia Monitor Research Centre really responded well and gave it a good review. I gather the UN is buying it.

Two quick points are that I couldn't get any support from Australia. I tried desperately hard by contacting the ACTU, various women's policy groups, in trying to get some support. I wrote it all on my own and it cost me a heap of dough because I had to do research in Australian libraries. It's a tragedy because Australia is one of those parochial countries that don't look outside its boundaries.

The reason I wrote it was that nothing had been written about it. There has been a lot written about women and OHS but it's all written by academics for other academics. I wanted to write something that was accessible

so I modelled it on "Where There Is No Doctor" to make it so accessible that a woman could pick it up and use it individually or as a training exercise, if they want. It tries to be very practical.

WSS After you struggled for funding have you had organisations join the cause and now try to promote it?

MK No. ISIS, an international women's information centre, receive royalties but they largely give away the books as they are funded as an information centre. We ended up getting some funding from the Canadians. I think it is very sad that an expatriate Australian could not receive support. I wrote to Jennie George, the then president of the ACTU, and received no response. I wasn't asking for a per diem to help me write. It was two air tickets as a minimum. Any response received stated that funding was only available for Australian issues.

about the author

Melody Kemp has been active in OHS fields for many years and has lived for almost 12 years, on and off, in Indonesia. In 1989 she completed her thesis on The Human Ecology of Logging in Solomon Islands. Since then she has completed several post-graduate studies and has been a Research Fellow at the Edith Cowan University and the University of Western Australia. Since June 2000 she has been a researcher with the United Nations Institute for Research into Social Development (Geneva).

Other than many conference papers, Melody wrote: **Working for Life: A Handbook for Women Industrial Workers**. This book was published in early 2000, by Isis International. It is designed as a how-to-do-it guide to occupational health and safety for women industrial workers and trade union or labour organisers in the developing world. It took some five years of work and research.