

In the shadow of the goons

Some governments and employers are using “goons” to intimidate and attack union activists. By hiring these thugs, they hope to avoid responsibility if the violence becomes known. The practice seems to be spreading.

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Employers and governments who violate workers' basic rights generally hate being taken to task in public. Nonetheless, in countries where human rights are not firmly anchored, there is always the temptation to get rid of union “troublemakers” by submitting them to all kinds of repression, whether by the police or by others, even if this means breaking national laws. But companies and States whose workers are seriously ill-treated risk losing contracts with powerful purchasers who are concerned about their image (even if these purchasers themselves often impose such low prices that they push the suppliers into exploiting their staff). The clients fear that some end-consumers will shun their wares if the media report serious violations of workers' rights by their suppliers.

More and more, in a bid to take out the unions without attracting criticism, employers and the authorities in some parts of the world are using the “services” of goons – thugs hired to threaten and intimidate workers who stand up for their rights, or even to neutralize them by force. To preserve their image in the media, the people who hire these goons pretend to have no connection with them, but more and more trade union voices are being raised in protest against these practices.

This trend of paying goons to attack striking workers is at its strongest in Asia. Chea Vichea, President of the Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia, knew all about this kind of violence: “When we carry out protests such as demonstrations, the authorities

sometimes send members of the ‘Pagoda Boys’, a group of young people with close links to the ruling party, who harass and sometimes attack us. The police simply look on as they destroy our loudspeakers and banners and even when they hit workers. On the other hand, when workers try to defend themselves, they are attacked by the police”.

Recorded in October 2003, his words now echo down to us as the angry cry of a man whose struggle was always non-violent. At the age of 36, Chea Vichea, married and the father of a child, was murdered in Phnom Penh on 22 January 2004. Three bullets hit him at point-blank range while he was reading his newspaper on a street in the Cambodian capital. Despite death threats, he had pressed ahead with a campaign that brought noticeable improvements in working conditions for some 200,000 garment workers.¹

But it is not only in developing countries that employers hire goons. In 1997, for instance, the Australian and international trade union movements thwarted a secret plan dreamt up by the Australian Federal Government to neutralize the very powerful Maritime Union of Australia (MUA). An innocuous-looking small ad in the Australian Defence Force (ADF) magazine *The Army* caught the unions' eye. Published just when the ADF was preparing to reduce its strength from 57,000 to 50,000, the ad offered “diggers”² an attractive new opening in civvie street. But the required profile closely matched that of a docker, and the jobs on offer were in major

Australian ports that had recently been through rather tough industrial disputes. The unions very soon discovered that the Canberra Government was attempting nothing more or less than the recruitment of mercenaries to bust the dockers' union, replace the strikers and crack down hard on anyone who still didn't get the message. Nothing was left to chance. The ex-military recruits were sent to Dubai for training. Handling them was a firm headed by an expert in unarmed combat and the close protection of VIPs. But the unions' revelations caused an outcry. The recruits had to pack up and leave, and the Government finally came clean. Otherwise, one can well imagine the turn that things might have taken down on the waterfront...³

Thailand has also had its share of anti-worker attacks by goons. The ICFTU annual report on violations of trade union rights published in 2001 relates the case of the Thai Durable Kriang textile plant, located in the Bangkok region. On 30 May 2000, to break a strike during which the workers had occupied the plant, management sacked 390 workers, including 15 union representatives. Soon after, the violence started. "On 14 and 15 June, a few dozen vandals managed to get into the plant", explains union representative Suparb Sansvay. "They threw stones at us, hit us with wooden batons and squirted fire extinguishers at us. One woman worker had her ribs broken, and several others also had to be hospitalized. When the police arrived, they arrested the thugs, but they let them go again before they even got to the police station." The violence against the strikers started up again a week later. "This time, 150 vandals arrived, marshalled by people in uniform and led by the director of the firm", says 19-year-old worker Nipaporn. "First, they destroyed the barriers behind which we had retreated. We sat down on the ground and linked arms to stop them getting into the plant. Then they hit us with handcuffs and batons and kicked us all over our bodies. The director encouraged them to beat us." It took an hour and a half for the police to arrive and chase off the attackers. Again, there were no arrests.

There have been other cases of the use of thugs against worker protests in Thai factories over the past few years, notably those producing clothes for Triumph and toys for Master Toy.

Murders go unpunished

The assaults sometimes turn into murders. That is what happened in 2001 at the PT Kadera plant in Indonesia, when 400 striking workers held a sit-in for better working conditions. During the night, while the workers were asleep inside the plant, they were attacked by more than 400 goons armed with knives, metal bars, stones and even firearms. One worker, Kimun Effendi, died during the attack and another, Rachmat Hidayat, succumbed to his injuries while in hospital. Another ten were seriously wounded. The workers later learned that the thugs had received more than 2,700 dollars from the employer to carry out this attack. In a report to the WTO this year, the ICFTU emphasizes that Indonesian trade unions are reporting more and more attacks on their activists by paramilitaries who are supported by the army and police and paid by unscrupulous employers.

However, Asia is not the only part of the world where these practices are spreading. In Latin America too, plenty of unscrupulous employers and authorities use the services of the goons. This is notably the case in Ecuador where, on 16 May 2002, 300 armed, masked mercenaries burst into the Los Alamos banana plantation at two o'clock in the morning and attacked striking workers in their homes. Nineteen people were injured and one worker, Mauro Romero, lost a leg. Brutal repression of trade union activities is also a characteristic of Haiti, where gangs linked to the rulers have repeatedly attacked trade unionists. In 2002, after a demonstration by rural workers, two elderly members of the trade union Batay Ouvriyè (Workers' Struggle) were dragged out of a house by company-paid hooligans, who mutilated them with knives, beheaded them and flung them into a pit.

Anti-union practices are sometimes solidly anchored within a firm. In November 2003, Union Network International (UNI), the service workers' global union federation, lodged a complaint with the International Labour Office about the actions of the Danish multinational, Group 4 Falck, which specializes in security work. In fact, the complaint mainly concerns the group's American subsidiary, Wackenhut, known for its seldom-equalled hostility to trade unions. Wackenhut had the nerve to tell its workers that they should quit the union if they wanted to benefit from the company's health insurance scheme. Such attitudes are not uncommon in the United States, where a recent study showed that 75 per cent of employers hire consultants to help them combat union organizing.⁴ Wackenhut is an old hand at this. By 1997, the American company was operating in about 50 countries. In Guatemala, it even won the security contract for the American embassy in Guatemala City and it handled money transports for a number of companies, including McDonald's restaurants. But its activities extended further. Wackenhut also became a specialized consultant for firms that would like to do without trade unions. A confidential document dating back to 1995 was discovered by unions in 1997. It speaks volumes. The paper reads like an instruction manual for union-busting: how to recruit spies among the workers, set up puppet unions, carve up the business to get round union representation rules, and discredit agitators. The document recommends the "iron hand" in the "velvet glove". At the time, trade unionism was under pressure in Guatemala. Trade unionists were being abducted. Others were receiving death threats and many were fired.⁵ In 2002, when Wackenhut was taken over by G4 Falck, negotiations started between the multinational and UNI. Since then, Wackenhut has continued to blot the escutcheon of the Copenhagen parent company, which nonetheless refuses to accept responsibility for its subsidiary's behaviour. "Neutralize and eliminate the trade unions" was the slogan of the

confidential document unearthed in Guatemala. Wackenhut still seems to be following it.

Sexual aggression

In some countries, the thugs are even tougher on women trade unionists. In the Bangladeshi textile industry, for example, some women workers have dared to go public about the ill-treatment they suffer at night, when they are walking home after long stretches of overtime. "The women workers are constantly afraid because there are prowlers around and a number of sexual attacks have already taken place, including rapes", a Bangladeshi lawyer explains. "Only a tiny fraction of such cases are reported, as the women would lose their honour if they disclosed what had happened to them. So very few complaints are lodged, and this encourages the prowlers to continue. But is it pure coincidence that the victims include a disproportionate number of women who are actively defending workers' rights? Are they better-looking than the others or, more likely, are they targeted because of their commitment?" In some cases, the aggressors actually refer to trade union activities as a justification for the rapes that they commit. "In El Salvador, a woman trade unionist who was active in the textile sector was intimidated on several occasions by an employer's hitmen", says Janek Kuczkiwicz, who heads the ICFTU trade union rights department. "Finally, they raped her daughter and told her it would be her turn next – unless she stopped her trade union activities." Reprisals against trade unionists' families happen in a number of countries. In Ukraine, the wife of a union leader in the mining sector is often stalked around the streets, and his son is harassed by "strangers" who taunt him about his father's union activities. The union leader decided to send his daughter to study abroad so as to save her from further harassment.

Even the numerically strongest and most solidly established organizations are not spared. One February night in 2002,

a man in police uniform broke into the headquarters of the Brazilian trade union confederation CUT. Hard on his heels came an armed gang who trashed the premises and stole anything of value. In Mexico, just after voting on the terms of a new collective agreement, members of the pilot's union ASPA came under brutal attack from thugs hired by the AVIACSA company. "The tenser the industrial relations are, the more risk there is of physical violence of this kind", Kuczkiewicz explains. "We only get to hear about a minority of such cases."

So what can be done about cases like this? Proving a link between the goons and employers or the authorities is difficult without the authorities' cooperation. The international trade union organizations do call on the governments concerned to live up to their responsibilities and launch inquiries, but the great majority of union rights violations involving thugs still go unpunished.

Notes

¹ The murder of Chea Vichea was strongly condemned by the ILO and its Bureau for Workers' Activities, and also by the international trade union organizations which called for an impartial enquiry to identify the killers and bring them to justice. A complaint lodged with the ILO by the Cambodian union led the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association, in November 2003, to seek explanations from the Cambodian Government concerning the dismissal of Vichea and 30 other members of his trade union on account of their trade union activities. The Committee called for urgent measures to reinstate the trade unionists in their jobs and measures to ensure their protection against acts of anti-union discrimination.

² Australians, and more particularly Australian soldiers, have been popularly known as "diggers" ever since the First World War. The nickname recalls their wartime trench-digging, as well as Australia's mining and prospecting activities.

³ For more details of this affair, see Luc Demaret: "Australia's Fifth Column", *Trade Union World*, ICFTU, Brussels, January 1998.

⁴ American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO): *The Silent War*, June 2002.

⁵ *Trade Union World*, ICFTU, January 1998.