

# ACTION

ASIAN COLLECTIVE INFORMATION

**Newsletter**

Fifth Edition

September 2021



“Building Labour  
Solidarity Across Asia”



## Newsletter

Fifth Edition

September 2021

# FOREWORD

DGB Bildungswerk BUND Asia Program 2019-2021 presents the fifth edition of ACTION Newsletter. This newsletter series is an attempt to expand personal and organisational knowledge among DGB BW's Asia partners and to strengthen regional and international solidarity in trade union and labour movements. This last edition of ACTION Newsletter will trace our journey over the past three years – the achievements, the challenges, moments of joyful surprises as well as disappointments. Let's reflect on the solutions we have devised to mitigate our myriad challenges.

DGB BW partners in Asia have in-depth knowledge and hands-on experience in addressing the issues of workers across a diverse range of sectors. Therefore, the initial objective of this Asia Regional Component initiative was to share experiences, exchange learnings, and jointly develop strategies for building and contributing to stronger solidarity and dynamism within the labour movement in Asia. This objective has remained true up to now.

DGB BW Asia Partners have been actively involved in this initiative for the past three years, from gathering with like-minded people to exchange stories and experiences. As time flies incredibly fast, this initiative has reached its final year, but the relations we have cultivated along the way will not stop here. This may be the last edition, but we keep moving into the future with fire in our bellies and our heads held high... pledging to make the world a better place for workers and trade unions!

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# Sea of Stories

## Being part of the Asia Regional Component - The Integrated Shared Learnings

The main objective of the Asia Regional Component initiative is to provide a medium for DGB BW partners in Asia to be able to integrate each other's learnings into their respective work, especially with regards to strategies to promote leadership of women and young workers in trade unions, to undertake organizing, advocacy, and campaign work. In its journey since 2019, we have made several strides together in creating a cross-learning culture built from this initiative.

Several methods presented by the partners through information-sharing moments have successfully inspired the others to adopt them. One instance is the effort to incorporate the youth and women into their own activities, which is realized by providing wider and strategic opportunities for them through increased involvement in raising issues about youth and unions. The opportunity to share inspiring stories from their respective unions has also generated a number of concrete approaches that can be adopted so that more qualified training can be fostered for these young workers to take on a more strategic role in future union work.

"From our meetings and activities we always incorporate the sharing of knowledge and inspiring stories from their unions." (PSI)

"We have done our level best to incorporate more youth & women into our activities in the past 3 years as part of encouraging new/fresh leadership in our TU movement." (BILS)

"Being a speaker, we realized how important and crucial it is for young workers to receive a stage and platform to talk about youth and union issues." (PSI)



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Another popular method is the use of technology to do organizing work. The fact that the partners work side by side with young workers who have great exposure to technological developments is utilised to organise more young workers, either for recruitment or just for knowledge-sharing.



Not only that, one of our partners, BWI, has also used technology in the form of a mobile application to collect data and track the progress of its target groups, i.e. women construction workers in India and Nepal. This has inspired other partners to also develop similar ideas to make their work more agile in the future. It is undeniable that the COVID-19 situation that has hit us since last year requires all of us to adopt various new ways of working with the help of technology.

“The use of digital/online platforms for outreach and organizing work has been well noted and aimed to sharpen current interventions.” (BWI)

“Using the content to prepare IEC materials.”  
(Indian Academy for Self Employed Women)

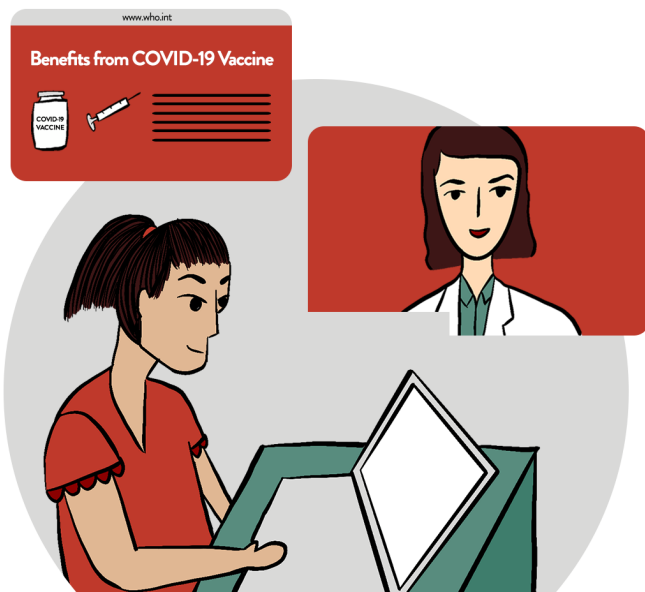
The entry of Generation Z into the workforce also, more or less, requires labour organisations to adapt to the best approach to attract them to join trade unions. The power of social media is undoubtedly effective in terms of spreading news and reaching a large scale audience, and video campaign is one of the most-used approaches lately to voice particular issues. This is also realised by the partners and they continue to maximise the use of social media as an effective communication tool. One example is how the partners are using their websites and short videos to campaign for the Ratification of the ILO Convention 190 – a strategy also done collectively by many unions. This kind of approach has inspired the partners to put forward the element of collaboration in voicing a particular campaign.

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Amid the current pandemic situation, there are also several approaches taken by the partners in an effort to organise their members. Particularly in developing countries, stigmatisation regarding vaccines to overcome the COVID-19 has led to some workers being reluctant to get vaccinated for fear of health effects. Let's take Indonesia as an example. In order to tackle the stigma among informal workers, TURC was providing free health consultations with experts, while raising awareness of the importance of preventing the severe effects of the COVID-19 by vaccination. Not only that, a religious approach was also used in this activity to clear up any misunderstanding regarding the circulation of non-halal vaccines. It turned out that women homeworkers were highly interested in this online meeting, as they actively asked questions to the resource persons. A similar approach is also being taken in India, where IASEW is creating a program for self-employed women workers to increase their awareness of the COVID-19 and the vaccination.



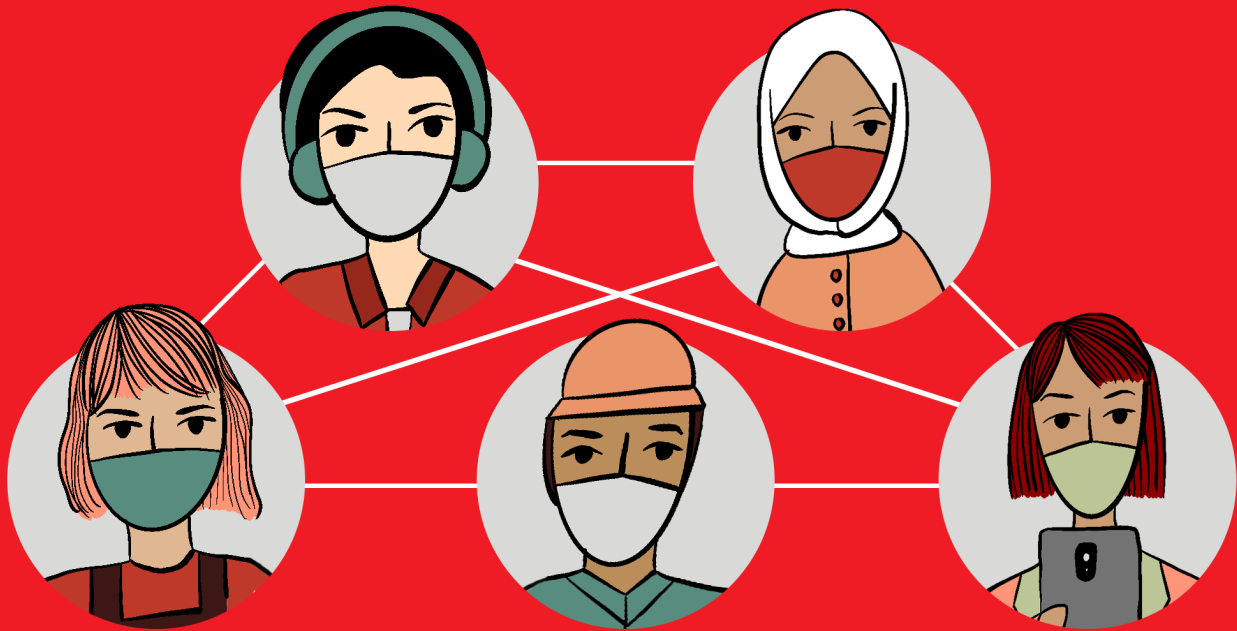
The diversity of industries that are of particular concern to each organisation – from the manufacturing, garment and textile sectors to the public and construction sectors – is also one of the added values that partners get by joining this initiative. The exchange of information on best practices and problem solving generated from various activities facilitated by TURC has helped the partners to build opinions on and awareness of different issues in different sectors. This also makes the partners more aware of the importance of engaging in partnership to generate a wider-known result of an issue. Even though they come from different industries, a commonly shared issue on women and young workers in the unions remains the priority.

In the Asia Regional Component, efforts to bridge communication are carried out not only through meetings such as Regional Workshops or online discussions, but also through Digital Newsletters, which are released bi-annually. The hope is that the newsletters can become a communication medium that the partners can use to share best practices, stories of change, or other developments at the organisational level. The benefit has been confirmed by some partners, noting that the newsletters have become a useful source of updates to broaden perspectives on several contexts that occur in the countries where the partners are based. Through the ACTION Newsletter, we strive to pool these contents into an inspiring package as a reminder that what we have done so far is indeed contributing to making a difference. Focusing on inspirational stories and change, the ACTION Newsletter has helped the process of documenting work and good practices about the nuance of labour issues at the Asian level to be available for a wider audience.



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Those whose inspiring stories have been captured in the ACTION Newsletter feel a sense of pride and increased confidence that their stories are known and appreciated by a lot of people across the world.

Furthermore, the Asia Regional Component has somewhat helped partners' development, not only at the institutional level but also at the individual level. In several discussions and information sharing through the newsletters, we have highlighted several points on how partners feel that this initiative has helped broaden their way of thinking by seeing things from a wider perspective due to exposure beyond the local level. Of course, finding and being able to intensely communicate with a network of trade unionists in a wider sector is also one of the highlighted developments.

In this way, the potential for cross-sector collaboration in voicing an issue is more likely to unlock. Especially in the current pandemic conditions, the Asia Regional Component not only seeks to maintain communication among the partners, but has also contributed to gaining more professional value of the partners, especially in carrying out activities. This pandemic situation has forced us to adapt to new habits. However, the partners do not surrender nor do they give up their efforts to protect workers' welfare as reflected in the creativity and maturity of their organisations in carrying out various activities.

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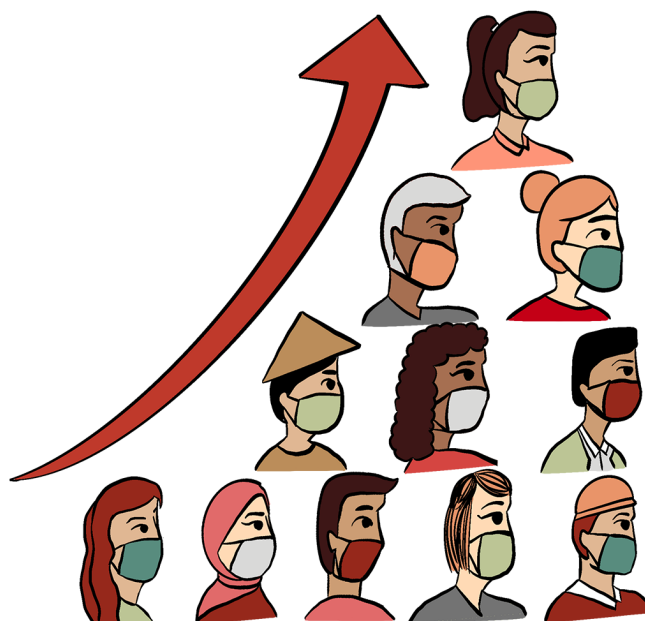
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# The Retrospective

“Only in the darkness can you see the stars”  
Martin Luther King Jr.

These powerful words of Martin Luther King Jr. now become more potent and relevant than ever. COVID-19 tested the limits of human resilience. As the world copes with the unprecedented challenges posed by this all-pervasive pandemic, we also see the human spirit trying to push boundaries and people collectively addressing insecurities and fears and supporting one another. The labour movement is no different. All of the DGB BW Asia partners quickly and precisely transformed their activities to ensure these could still be implemented amid the pandemic. The pandemic compelled the partners to be more adaptive to unpredictable circumstances. Face-to-face meetings were and are still prohibited in many places, necessitating reliance on technology to conduct virtual meetings, which can be isolating. As a social being, the warmth and joy of face-to-face connection is irreplaceable. And often we have to deal with technical problems, like the participants who have difficulties using the device or who are struggling with poor connectivity in their areas.



Just like most partners, we had to transform all activities into virtual. But online activities have limited participation largely to those with devices and internet access. It is not uncommon to see trainees, some using only mobiles, coming from signal-challenged locations far from capitals, being disconnected. (ITUC-AP)

Not being able to facilitate the Regional Workshop in person was a huge disappointment, but somehow we have been gaining new experience in hosting a Virtual Workshop (which apparently takes way more complicated preparation than offline events). (TURC)



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The partners have already recognised the value of developing networks and collaborating with others to have a stronger impact. Unfortunately, this strategy did not function properly or efficiently when the Covid-19 disease began spreading around the world, particularly at the beginning, when everyone was still scrambling to adjust to the new circumstances. Additional efforts need to be made to ensure that this collaborative endeavour continues to be beneficial, for instance, by maintaining a high level of communication with stakeholders. Thus, it is quite natural for partners to be concerned about obtaining desired outcomes following the modification and adaptation process.

The level of cooperation of some of our government agencies like DoL was not satisfactory enough. (BILS)

The most difficult challenge is implementing collaborative programs. (Indian Academy for Self Employed Women)

Ensuring that the online activities meet the target. (TURC)



More than that, this pandemic undoubtedly gives us all sorrow: the feeling of isolation, anxiety, children losing their parents, women suddenly having to engage in earning money for their families when their husbands lose their employment, the increasing number of people who lost their livelihood, and the most heart-breaking moment – witnessing our family, friends, and co-workers leaving us forever.

Despite all the efforts, it has been very disheartening to observe loss of livelihood and loss of lives among thousands of workers and their families from the informal sector amidst the COVID-19. (BWI)

In addition to socio-cultural barriers, the COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns were a challenging period for all, especially women and girls who bore the brunt of the pandemic. (BWI)

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Courage, inspiration, support, and hope are what we need the most at the moment, and the partners have reflected those aspects delightfully by not giving up on any of the hardships. Within the DGB BW projects in Asia, the partners have shown a great spirit of collegiality, comradeship and leadership by standing up for the rights of every worker they represent. They are consistently fighting for the rights of workers as the COVID-19 threatens to destabilize their lives.

“It has been gratifying to note that the DGB-BW partners stood up to the challenge posed by the health pandemic and continued to reach out and provide relief in the respective constituencies.” (BWI)

We were capable of sharing our struggle and how we overcame the situation. Different geographical locations, sectors, and organisations were not to act as barriers to our mutual learning. This learning process helped us not only in the development of our coping mechanisms during the pandemic but also made us stronger to keep going. There was room for us to learn from other partners' best practices and adopt them to our organisation. At the organisational level, being able to achieve the goals of the project faster and witnessing the development of the young generation within the organisation became a delightful moment.

The DGB BW Asia Regional Component has also helped us develop a good understanding and expand our perspectives about a variety of issues in the labour movement. We are able to see the complexity of this movement through the focus issues of each organisation. Despite the challenges during the pandemic, the spirit of collaborative action constantly influences all the organisations to sharpen the knowledge, be inspired, and be courageous in order to expand the achievements.



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# Building Solidarity

Health risks posed by the novel coronavirus are of course not the only challenge facing the labour movement. The pandemic also has impacted the fulfilment of labour's rights, such as cuts in salary or change in severance pay policies, unilateral termination of employment, and company's failure to meet the social security system for their labour. It is necessary to have an effective and efficient readiness, as well as a quick response to deal with situations like these. The same applies to trade unions. Trade unions must develop a special strategy to address the situations by building coordinated and cooperative efforts.

Like the main goal of this initiative, the DGB BW Asia Regional Component aims to build a spirit of solidarity. So we asked the partners what solidarity means to them. The partners define solidarity as a collaborative effort between organisations to overcome obstacles and problems through the process of sharing, learning, replicating, and contributing to one another across sectors, gender, and age, in order to fight for workers' rights and make the world a better place to live. Within this solidarity, we ensure that no one is left behind since it is established in an effort to mitigate the risks that may arise in the labour movement's activity and to help increase the organisation's resilience when facing a similar challenge in the future.

An effort to bridge all the gaps despite the uphill battle, and continue to give, share, receive, learn and unlearn to make the world a better place. (PSI)

To us, solidarity means standing up with others for a cause or a principle, irrespective of any consideration, be it the race, gender, religion or geographical location. (BWI)

The Asia Regional Component has a huge contribution to building solidarity of the labour movement across Asia. Each year, activities such as Regional Workshops and online discussions are held to exchange stories, challenges, and strategies among organisations across regions and sectors. Additionally, this platform allows members of the network to build their knowledge and expertise on labour movement-related issues that can be replicated in their respective organisations. Moreover, the Asia Regional Component has succeeded in building brotherhood and sisterhood among the partners who are always willing to help one another in times of need, for instance, supporting organisational campaigns.



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The Asia Regional Component gives an opportunity to learn about the work of the DGB-BW partners, including good practices. It provides a good platform for exchanging ideas, improving coordination and evolving partnerships. (BWI)

Having regular communication between and among partners is another approach to enhancing this solidarity. It is not just communicating via formal channels like email, but also via personal channels like personal messaging and social media accounts. So far, this process has been going well due to a very cooperative manner of all the partners.

The platform that has been provided, the wonderful people who have contributed, and the communication tools that have been utilised are all the resources that must be maintained. This movement is not limited to the three best years of our partnership. There are plenty of other great things we can accomplish with this spirit of cooperation and solidarity.





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# Stories of Change (Case Studies)

Seeing the change in leadership, young workers and women taking up leadership roles and leading from the front. (Protest led by young workers in Pakistan and India). (PSI)

It is pertinent to inform you that public servants from all over Pakistan from grade 1-16 staged a sit-in in front of the parliament house in the capital city.

The leaders of all Pakistan United Irrigation Employees Federation, Public Sector Employees Federation of Pakistan and Leadership of Punjab Lady Health Workers Union were also here, accompanied by thousands of young workers.

On the first day of the protest, 10th February, they marched peacefully towards the parliament while the Government deployed a large number of police and rangers personnel. Despite the peaceful march, the workers faced heavy shelling; a large number of the leaders were arrested; and some others were restricted while travelling towards the capital city.



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They are demanding a rise in salary because the government has not raised the salary in the last three years despite high inflations. They are also demanding an equal pay scale to provincial employees, end of privatisation and release of their union leaders from prison, as well as payment of group insurance at the time of retirement instead of death.

The workers are determined to continue the sit-in until their demands are met. As an affiliated federation of Public Services International-PSI, they look forward to our support at all levels.

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# How Hotel Worker Md. Nur-E-Alam Got His Job Back



Md. Abdul Awal worked as a Chef in Sadia's Kitchen, a locally popular restaurant located at Chawlkabazar, Chattogram. He had been working in the restaurant for 6 years. When COVID-19 situation started to turn severe in Bangladesh, like other enterprises, hotels and restaurants began to shut down. The owner of Sadia's Kitchen also closed the restaurant, advising all employees to go back home and assuring them that they would be re-appointed to their previous positions after improvement of the COVID-19 situation and re-opening of the restaurant business.

Accordingly, Md. Abdul Awal and his co-workers went back home. Three to four months passed by, and in August 2020 the restaurant re-opened. However, when Md. Abdul Awal and his co-workers came back, they were surprised to see that the restaurant-owner had appointed new staff, leaving no jobs for them. The workers did not get a satisfactory answer while they inquired about their service continuation. The workers were also denied the provision of termination and other benefits under the law, though Sadia's Kitchen was a profitable business-enterprise and had other outlets around the city.



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Md. Abdul Awal was a trade union activist involved with Bangladesh Trade Union Centre (BTUC). He mentioned all these happenings to Fazlul Kabir Mintu, another BTUC activist and the paralegal team member of BILS. Fazlul Kabir Mintu, on behalf of Md. Abdul Awal, drafted a grievance petition on 13 September 2020 and submitted it to the restaurant management. In the petition, an amount of BDT. 1,04,000/- was claimed besides re-appointment of Chef Md. Abdul Awal. A copy of the grievance was also given to Deputy Inspector General, Department of Inspection for Factory and Establishments (DIFE).

After a series of communication with the employers, DIFE officials, BTUC and BILS leadership, finally on 1 November 2020 Md. Abdul Awal was re-appointed to his previous position at Sadia's Kitchen. Awal thanked BILS and Fazlul Kabir Mintu for providing him legal assistance and moral support, standing beside him.



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# Indumathy: A Story of Struggle & Inspiration

Indumathy was born and raised in a lower middle-class family in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. She had to drop out of school after her 10th class to help provide for her family. She continued doing odd jobs to make ends meet till she got married to a mason at the age of 26 years, which led her to the construction sector.



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Indumathy started working as a helper with her husband at different construction sites in and around Chennai. She was moved by the situation of fellow women workers who were confined to low wages and who performed menial jobs at the sites. In addition, women workers lacked information on their rights and entitlements that often made them recipient of discriminatory and exploitative treatment. Indumathy started reaching out to women workers and encouraged them to come together and assert their rights collectively. Her desire to transform the lives of women workers through knowledge and training and to also address their grievances both at the micro and macro level brought her to Thamizhaga Kattida Thozhilalargal Madhiya Sangam (TKTMS).



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Indumathy joined the TKTMS and in a short span of time, managed to bring sizeable number of women construction workers under the union fold and also started raising their issues at the union level and other local and national platforms. Her dedication and commitment to workers' cause was soon acknowledged as she rose to position of Vice President of the TKTMS. Among others, she played an active role for the TKTMS in the ongoing health pandemic as she was instrumental in securing COVID-19 financial relief to numerous women construction workers. She also facilitated distribution of food kits, masks and sanitisers among worker's communities.

Indumathy has been playing an active role in mobilising and training women workers under the DGB-BW project interventions. She leads by example as she is now a certified master trainer in Assistant Decorative Painting thus sending a strong message to inspire fellow women workers to come forward and believe in themselves and their abilities and also in possibilities to transform their lives for a better future.

Indumathy says, "Socio-cultural challenges and also a lack of self-belief confine women construction workers to low paid unskilled jobs all their lives, which keeps them and their families on the lowest rung of economic ladder that makes their existence an everyday struggle. We, as women, have to come together and be each other's support to create an enabling environment for women construction workers with the support and interventions of trade unions. Our journey of change may be long and arduous but I believe that there is light at the end of the tunnel". (BWI)





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# Photo Gallery



Photo from ITUC-AP



Photo from BILS



Photo from TURC



Photo from BILS



Photo from PSI



Photo from IASEW

**ACTION** newsletter is published in cooperation with TURC (Trade Union Rights Centre) and DGB Bildungswerk BUND (German Trade Union Confederation - Trade Union Education). This newsletter is funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

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