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# Report on the Social Standard of Myanmar's Working People

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Reported by:

Zar Ni Thwe

Secretary General

AFFM - IUF

*After conducting a successful congress meeting, which was held on the 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> of April 2014, the AFFM - IUF strived to initiate intermediate level trade unions for townships and divisions within Myanmar. There are so far 621 basic level unions, 34 township level unions and 11 state and division level have already been established. The AFFM - IUF was registered as a national level federation on 21<sup>s</sup> May 2015. The AFFM - IUF's activities so far implemented and achieved have been guided by the congressional mandate.*

## **1. Political Transition**

With such a landslide victory of the NLD in the 2015's election, there have been concerns about whether the military (which has a historical penchant for intervening to ensure commanding rule) would accept the results of the election. However, the leaders of the ruling Union and Solidarity Development Party (USDP), then outgoing President Thein Sein, and the Tatmadaw Commander in Chief (Myanmar's military) Senior General Min Aung Hlaing came out to congratulate the NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi on her victory.

Having noted the above mentioned scenario, yet, despite this triumph, serious challenges remain that could derail Myanmar's democratic transition. Corruption is widespread, the country remains entrenched in ethnic violence, and economic reform is sorely needed.

Nearly every individual, including ethnic nationalities, is of high expectation that they will be able to reap the benefits of job security, sustainable income, and promotion of socio-economic status once the NLD party won the general election and has begun to lead the country. With the momentous shift in the political paradigm of Myanmar, difficulties obviously lied ahead and there are challenges in reforming the administrative functions of the government; though change may be incremental and could be slow at a time, it is hopeful that the possibility remains.

Parliament is attempting to reform some of the laws and codes which were previously deemed obsolete and dysfunctional. Questions have been posed to the parliament and government which highlight many technical issues that may have been relevant to the country in transition to democracy, but the outlook of Parliament's vision and aspiration on those technical relevance remain unclear and reflecting their lack of capacity and technical understanding in various development areas.

There have been immense criticisms on the methods and approaches of government in their attempt to mobilize the country toward national reconciliation, while seemed to devote less attention on the overall economic interest. The emphasis on national's

reconciliation with seemingly less interest on economic development has backfired the Government momentarily. It seemed to be general sentiment of the people to see changes in economic landscape happened quicker with a sight of incremental equity / or fairer share of wealth across the country. There is no argument surrounding the intentions of the cabinet in achieving national reconciliation and furthering the peace process, but with an understanding that these efforts will need time to be fully realised and in the meantime, government should have endeavoured to developing an effective and sustainable economic structure, to decentralize decision – making power to technical competent personnel (in the contrary to heavily and centrally dependent on the DASSK to make all decisions.) People have had great expectations for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD party, trusting that the Party and its prominent leader, as manifested in the election campaign, will usher the people into an era of economic prosperity with possibility to doubling or tripling level of incomes. Though the expectation seemed to be unfulfilled, as yet at the moment, it is of the view of AFFM/IUF that it should be understood that the transition of the country, its peace and wealth will require tremendous efforts and time to come to fruition.

## **2. Employment and Income**

For nearly half a century many of Myanmar's people have been classified as either refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) or illegal migrant workers. The country is endowed with a wealth of resources, including fertile land, minerals, hydrocarbons, forests, and water resources as well as a relatively young population. Historically, the natural resources were controlled by selected elite groups, who would then have sold its as raw material for production. Individuals, who worked hard to maintain and support the growth of these natural resources, were often neglected and their rights were unprotected / not preserved. They did not enjoy fair share of wealth in this sector.

Myanmar is an agricultural country and the majority of the nation's workforce operates within that sector. The Agriculture sector is a significant contributor to the economic output, export earnings and employment generation. The country is endowed with a rich and varied agricultural resource base, including abundant supplies of fresh water and marine resources as well as rich tropical forests. This allows for the production of a wide array of agri - food products.

Markets for agricultural productions are very wide and plentiful. Myanmar is centrally located; it is amongst three substantial populations (China, India, South East Asian region) which have high food demands. Undeniably, with the global increase in population, particularly in Asia, immense strain will be placed on food production world-wide. After the November 8<sup>th</sup> General Election Forbes published an article stating that investors are already lining up to invest in the "golden land of opportunities". Myanmar could become a

hub for the manufacturing sector as it sits right in the middle of the world's most heavily populated region - billions of potential consumers are just across the fence.

Myanmar's agricultural sector has a bright future, but needs to be reformed and restructured in areas where there is poor infrastructure, lack of financing, inadequate skill and R&D (Research and Development) , and insufficient government fundamental services. Despite having a substantial workforce, farms in Myanmar are currently facing shortages of skilled workers. The Myanmar Business Survey (2014) cites lack of skilled labour in Myanmar as one of the biggest obstacles to starting a business.

The male labour force in rural areas account for 69.2% in the agricultural sector, 13.5% in the industrial sector, and 17.4% in the services sector. (*Source: ILO Report on Labour Force Survey*)

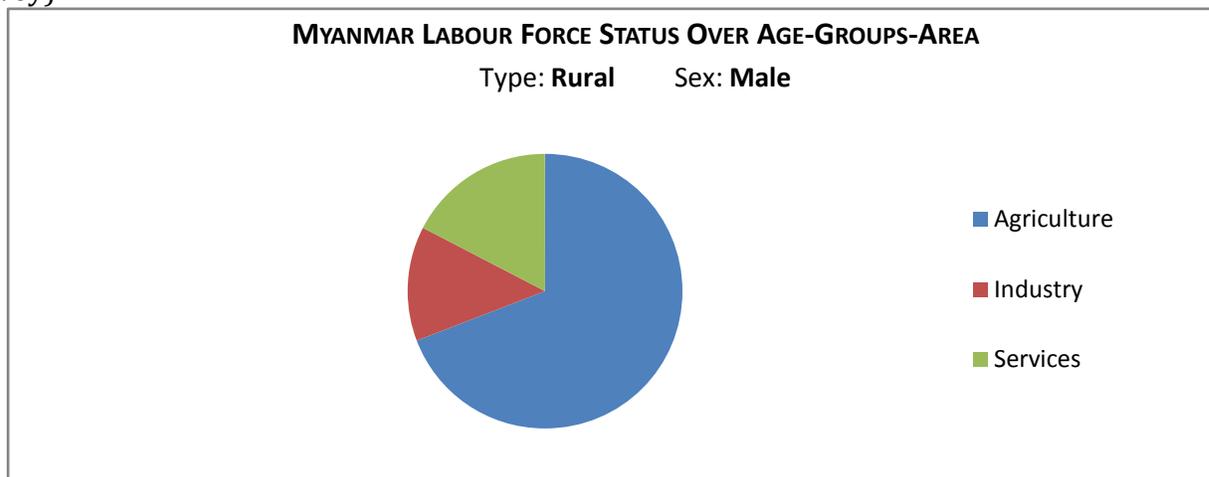
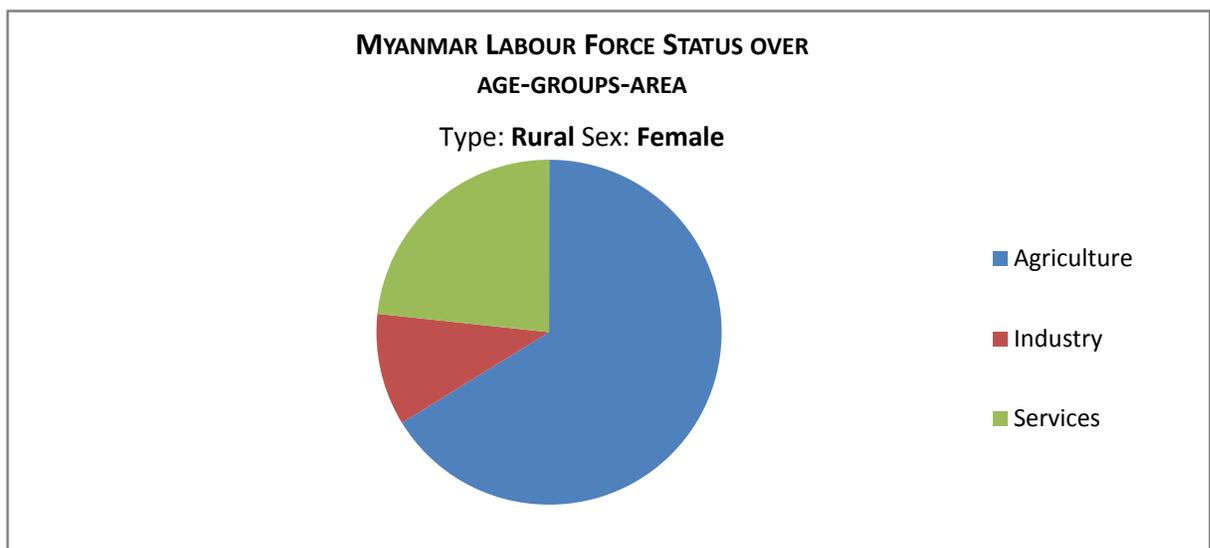


Figure 1: Myanmar Labour Force Rural Male Breakdown

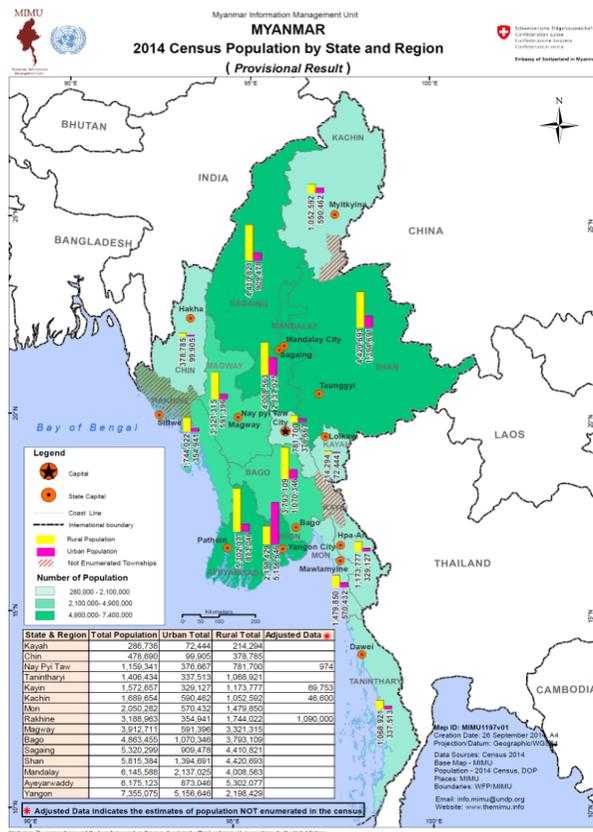


The female labour force is distributed as follows: 66.2% are in the agricultural sector, 10.5% are in industrial sector, and 23.3% are in the services sector. (Source: ILO Report on Labour Force Survey) The average monthly income of workers in the agricultural sector is 111,410 MMK, 138,940 MMK for those in the industrial sector, and 137,470 MMK for individuals in the service sector. (Source: ILO Report on Labour Force Survey)

The normal structure of employment and per capital income changes yearly. The instability of Myanmar's labour market allows for only a small number of workers to have a chance of income promotion through work experiences and skills training. Though Myanmar is rich in natural resources, it currently has the lowest GDP in South East Asia, making it the poorest country in the region. This can be attributed to a large workforce of unskilled workers.

### 3. Social Status

Myanmar is a very poor country. Though the range of error in the estimation may be large,



Myanmar's per capita GDP remains at only around US\$850 a head. It is the poorest country in ASEAN — poorer than the neighbouring countries of Laos and Cambodia. Even so, if Myanmar cannot generate more than triples its per capita income from now through 2030, as the ADB suggests, it will hardly change its rank as the poorest country in ASEAN.

Based on the latest United Nations estimates, the current population is **54,840,895** as of Thursday, July 6, 2017. About 35% of the population is urban areas (19,363,071 people in 2017). Others live in the rural areas and are seriously threatened by the limited water resources.

*“The human right to water is indispensable for leading a life in human dignity. It is a prerequisite for the realization of other human rights”*

[UN ICESCR General Comment No. 15]

On the paddy farms and beans plantations that supply Myanmar and ASEAN countries, small farmers, plantation workers, and their families have limited access to safe drinking water.

Agricultural and plantation workers everywhere in the country lack access to safe potable water at home and at the workplace. Lack of access to adequate sanitation is the primary cause of water contamination and diseases linked to

water. In addition to their waged work, women workers also have the burden of walking great distances to collect water. Women workers on tea plantations spend more than 2 hours daily collecting water for the family. Unfortunately, lack of sanitation puts women and adolescent girls at risk of harassment. Walking to isolated areas is a serious threat to their safety. Violation of the right to water and sanitation impacts all other rights, and where one right is violated others cannot be realised.

Lack of access to water and sanitation impacts on the right to education as well as the right to health; where women have to spend much of their day fetching water they have little or no time for other activities including trade union activities and other objectives through which they can exercise their rights. Lack of water and sanitation infrastructure has an impact on the rights to housing; and rights to adequate standards of living cannot be achieved without proper water and sanitation initiatives.

#### **4. Social Protection Policy Reform**

Myanmar's spending and coverage on social protection programs remains low. Developing the building blocks of a social protection system needs to be a solid, though gradual process based on strengthening institutional capacity ensuring fiscal sustainability, transparency, accountability in the spending in case of contributory scheme, and inclusiveness in the planning of the overall scheme. Key social protection reforms and the expansion of government-led social assistance programs can promote poverty reduction and help Myanmar address vulnerabilities in an effective and sustainable way. The experiences of development partners' as well as voices of social partners can be an important asset government can resort to when designing and implementing social assistance in Myanmar.

သာစွဌာနေ မနောမြေ The Jadeland of Myanmar (Kachin State)  
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With nearly fifty years of economic mismanagement, Myanmar’s working people are low income, high educational drop outs, with wide knowledge gaps and are at risk for unemployment and underemployment. Sustainable and decent employment is absolutely essential. The working people should have necessary resources to allow them to progress in their career. Myanmar’s people should be entitled to job security and work in an environment that supports them in having a decent living standard.

Due to a lack of vocational skill and knowledge, Myanmar’s communities in general and in particular those who reside in rural areas are dependent on external assistance of humanitarian aid from various NGOs. Without assistance, they do not have the confidence to work and compete for a decent wage.

5. Impact of Climate Change to Myanmar Agriculture

Myanmar’s economy and society is still largely dependent on agriculture, which is mostly rain-fed. The changes in climate, therefore, have a heavy impact on this important sector. According to the latest projections, Myanmar faces more extreme weather turbulence as temperatures unusually rises: the country has increasingly become cyclones prone-



climate, more numbers of storms and floods and in the contrary more harsh weather in the middle parts of country, which results in severe droughts. Before 2000, cyclones made landfall along Myanmar's coast approximately once every de landfall every year. In the Dry Zone – which stretches from lower Sagaing Region to western and three years. Since the turn of the century, cyclones have ma central Mandalay Region and most of Magwe Region, encompassing 58 townships – severe droughts have increased in frequency from 1992 to 2002, with the most severe drought taking place in 2010 with extreme temperatures of up to 47.2 degrees Celsius. What is especially alarming is that global warming hits hardest in areas where the population is most concentrated: the Delta Region, which is prone to tropical storms, cyclones and heavy rains, and the Dry Zone, which is most affected by droughts. (NAPA 2012)

## **6. The Role of ILO and Labour Standard**

The ILO core conventions describe key labour standards aimed at promoting opportunities for decent and productive work, where men and women can work in conditions of equity, non-discrimination, security, freedom, and dignity. The proposed indicator tracks countries' ratification of and compliance with the eight fundamental ILO conventions, which cover the following issues: freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining; the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour; the minimum age for labour and the immediate elimination of the worst forms of child labour; and the elimination of discrimination in respect to employment and occupation, including equal remuneration.

Myanmar appeared to have had some significant changes in the year 2011, in which the government expressed itself the wishes to work more closely with the ILO. The civilian government, which shortly before that has stripped out their military uniforms, opened the door and re-established constructive relations with international communities starting with ASEAN as Myanmar expressed its willingness to change their political configuration and aspiration to democratize the country, as such it gained acceptance from ASEAN members to become the Chair of that Organization the first time ever since it joined that Organization. Political prisoners including public figure Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was released from long term house-arrest, and there was the adoption of labour organization law and freedom of association was allowed. These significant changes that took place in important areas have been recognized by international community. It was believed that Myanmar has set its foot to walk toward rule of law, where by laws are taken as the main axis and recognition of trade union rights has become symbolically importance as a gesture of government recognition to civil and political rights of its people.

## **7. Initiated Actions for Ending Forced Labour**

The ILO Liaison office's continued efforts to end forced labour since 2012 through the newly signed time – bound Action Plan and the MOU to end forced labour has accomplished some targeted activities such as education and awareness campaigns. These activities have resulted in reduction of level of forced labour practice across the country, though in ethnic areas where conflicts persist forced labour in term of porter for military operations, sentry duty as well as forced cropping for military own consumption remain the problems. In addition, through the trade union establishment the information with regard to forced labour in the workplace has started to be known and reported to the ILO and as such has become a major concern. Workers and employers need to be better informed on their rights in order to protect themselves from the practice.

## **8. Elimination of Child labour**

Children have been associated in Myanmar's economy for a long time in all sectors and at all levels especially in rural areas and in the agricultural sector. Presently, shop assistance and road construction sectors are sectors that increasingly have a prevalence of this problems .

Part of the ILO's priority and objectives is to address the existing gaps in the elimination of child labour. The ILO assists the Government to establish "a comprehensive, inclusive and efficient multi-stakeholder response" for the problems. The ILO has also been proactive in engaging with its social partners as well as NOGs / OBOs partners in awareness raising campaigning at all levels across the country

Identified as priority in the work toward ending the practice of child labour is to work together with social partners and civil society members to establish hazardous work list as increased child labour, particularly in hazardous working conditions, diminishes the chance for sustainable employment and job security for working people in all areas of the country, with rural areas identified as more vulnerable than others.

To cite an example of a sort of child labour Myanmar suffers: a 12 year old boy who collects empty plastic bottles near the Mee Gwet market of Hlaing Thar Yar industrial zone. He said "I don't want to do this job, but my mom has to pay on daily basis high interest for a loan she borrowed from money lenders. I cannot afford not to work". Almost all of the working people who are employed in industrial zones are in debt and have to contribute to either daily, weekly, or monthly repayments. Their children often go to work to supplement the family income.

## **9. Process of Labour Law Reform**

Myanmar labour law reform is still in progress. There are numerous opinions and suggestions among stakeholders engaged in the process. It is imperative though, that groups of workers, employers and governments accept decentralization approach. From AFFM/IUF side, it is of an opinion that semantics issues and trivia discussion is counter-productive and does not help anyone to achieve sustainable employment. All stakeholders should be enthusiastic to make difference to the working conditions by acquiring substantive technical knowhow on labour subject to allow themselves to participate in the process meaningfully and pay less attention to politics and unnecessary trivia issues. . Amending laws to become a better and relevant to the current situation is one objective to be achieved, but to monitor the implement thereof is another objective that will require capacity and efforts from the side of trade union to monitor.

## **10. Social Dialogue**

Myanmar's social dialogue mechanism essentially started in 2015. Social dialogue promotes discussion on key and a priority issue related to labour law reform and requires an identification of capacity as well as other needs from the side of parties to dialogue. Work programs, labour law reform, technical working groups on various technical areas continue to operate actively. Social dialogue mechanism is good, in that it allows for the needs of both workers and employers to be conveyed to the attention of the Government for consideration and recognition. Social dialogue is accepted by MOLIP as platform to work toward adopting policy and law. MOLIP has also recognized the importance to bring along their other peer ministries to share responsibility.

It goes without saying that social dialogue is an important mechanism and should be taken seriously by all parties concern. It is not a forum to demonstrate a commitment to the process alone, but also the decision and recommendations made through the use of this process should be taken seriously and with due respect to all parties concern. Social dialogue will continue play important role in Myanmar, particularly at this reform juncture, as the process itself demonstrates democratization process, an aspiration the Government has expressed its commitment.

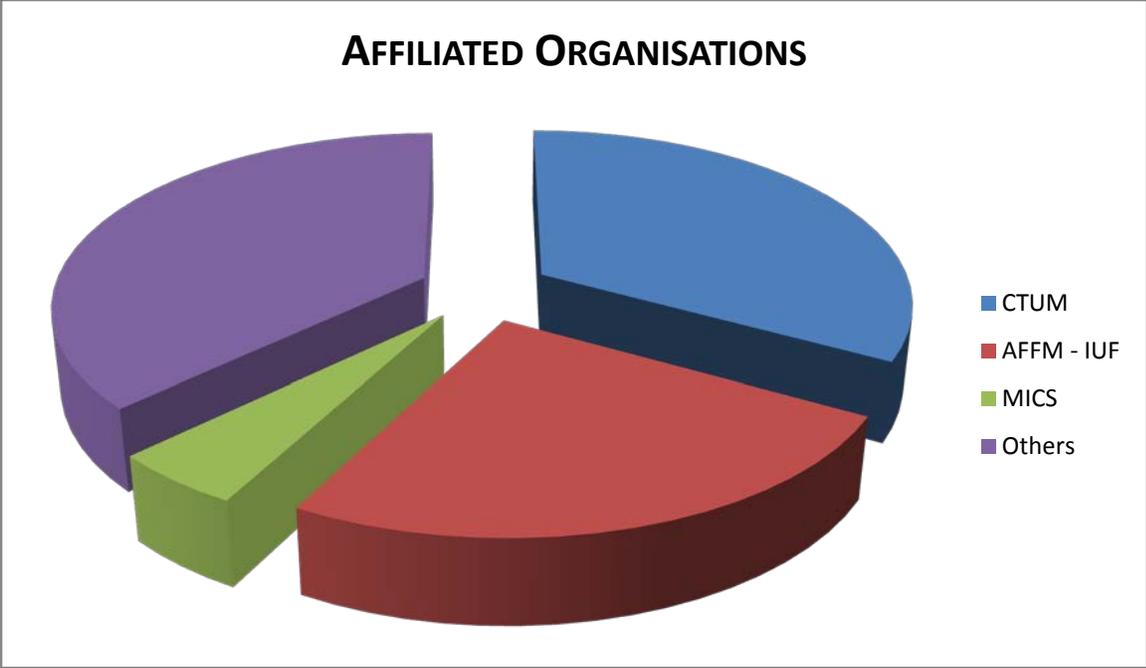
## **11. Myanmar Trade Union movement**

There are three major trade unions known as CTUM, AFFM - IUF and MICS. These organisations are recognised as intermediate level organisations according to the Labour Organization Law (LOL). These organisations often dispute on collective activities (a sign of no solidarity among trade unions) and membership. With this ongoing dispute in the

background, the organizations appeared giving less importance to substance of trade union solidarity, critical labour –related issues that confronted workers across the country. One outstanding and fundamental issues that needs to sort out is with regard to process of selecting representative to participate in the ILC and as such there is no mechanism to report back to fellow trade unionists on the ILC outcome when returned.

Examination of representation does not only include acceptance of paper documentation, but also requires clarity in how groups and individuals are represented as well as verification of participant numbers. In the event that none of the Axis organizations represents the majority of workers in Myanmar, as we are at the early days of trade union establishment, it would be in the best interest of workers in Myanmar, and not one particular organization only, to set up a rotational system to select workers to participate in the ILC. The knowledge and experience from the ILC will allow trade union movement in Myanmar to be stronger and moving toward gaining more membership and working together in solidarity.

It is imperative that groups respect one another and reconcile issues amongst trade unions to avoid acting tyrannically.



## **12 What Does AFFM - IUF do**

Poverty and unemployment pose great challenges to the newly reform democratic Myanmar. Unemployment and economic stagnation has adversely affected the trade union movement. This movement has further suffered because of prevailing corruption in the official machinery which instead of safeguarding the interest of the working people is playing in the hands of the cronies. As a result, the trade union movement is passing through one of the worst ever period of the global trade unions society.

Although there have quite a lot of arguable positives and negatives things, the AFFM - IUF is strongly achieved as the mandate of 2014 congress. On the mandate to build up of stronger AFFM - IUF, the core leaders and regional leaders are actively involved for at least 10 courses of youth and women leadership trainings to improve education, organizing and campaign. Through our end Force Labour, child labour and human Trafficking campaign in the 36 target places we sought to ensure promotion of labour standard along country.

With the successful passage of the youth and women seminars, attention now has turned to a born of new face with youth and women leadership role. Steps were also undertaken to set up cooperative societies which design to sustainable income for rural workers who work for informal sector.

## **13. Key issues of Myanmar Agricultural Workers**

### **Issues Affecting Farmers and Agricultural Workers of Myanmar:**

- Intensified Landlessness
- Land Grabbing
- Human Rights Violations
- Very Low income and debts
- Food insecurity
- Environmental destruction/climate crisis due to the imperialists corporate agenda
- Oppression, displacement, discrimination

## **14. AFFM - IUF empowerment for Agriculture**

- ✓ Farmers and agricultural workers continue to educate, organize, and mobilise
- ✓ Strengthen the agricultural workers' movement for land, living wages, security of employment and safe working conditions.

- ✓ Strengthen the people's movement on climate change and the people's self determination in food sovereignty and agriculture
- ✓ Integrate the agricultural worker's struggle for genuine agrarian reform and food sovereignty in the over-all struggle for freedom and democracy

## **15. AFFM - IUF' youth and Women Resolution**

# **Youth Resolution**

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First Seminar of the AFFM – IUF Youth Committee

*7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> September 2016, Yangon*

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SUSTAINABLE JOB OPPORTUNITY AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

### **ORGANIZE**

- Encouraging policy reform regarding sustainable employment for those in rural areas and the agricultural sectors
- AFFM – IUF youth committee members visit and collaborate with young members of affiliated unions to optimise experiences and facilitate success in future endeavours.
- Supporting outreach to increase group appeal and increase the number of young and new members
- Facilitating an effective communication system to be used amongst young members

### **FIGHT**

- Proposing that the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population host vocational training and skills development workshops/meetings
- Collaborating with ILO, INGOs, NGOs - to further skills development and promote vocational education for AFFM – IUF youth
- Requesting parliament earnestly look at adopting policies which focus on youth development
- Organizing and coordinating the meeting, counselling, collective bargaining, and negotiating of the AFFM – IUF regional offices in order to address challenges affecting youths

### **WIN**

- Increasing core members for the AFFM – IUF youth committee
- Preparing and encouraging well-trained AFFM – IUF youths into leadership positions and directing greater involvement within the organization

- Fostering consultation with Government officials  
Work towards gaining international recognition

# AFFM-IUF Women's Committee

First Seminar of Women Members of AFFM – IUF

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*8<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> September 2016, Yangon*

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## **RESOLUTION 1: THE ROLE OF WOMEN LEADERSHIP AND DISCRIMINATION**

### **ORGANIZE**

- Encouraging at least 50 percent of women to have greater involvement in all levels of union structure and leadership roles
- Systematically training women leaders to be the resource personnel for capacity building using survey and research techniques as well as administration tasks
- Strengthening and increasing female participation
- Setting up an effective communication system amongst women members

### **FIGHT**

- Hosting women workshops and seminars to promote female participation and capacity
- Presenting gender issues that may provide input and impact the national policy
- Encouraging at least 30 percent of female participation in all kinds of training and forum activities

### **WIN**

- Increasing core members in the AFFM – IUF women's committee
  - Involving women in dominant roles such as action committees, decision making processes and policy levels
- 

## **RESOLUTION 2: HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN**

### **ORGANIZE**

- Forming networks with international and/ or internal women organizations to prevent all forms of harassment towards women
- Using signboards and posters for raising awareness about human trafficking
- Raising awareness that human trafficking is criminal

#### **FIGHT**

- Acknowledging the issue of sexual harassment and ensuring women are safe in the workplace
- Coordinating with international organizations to promote and further education for women
- Requesting the Minister of Labour, Immigration and Population host vocational training for women
- Gathering information to facilitate effective changes in the rule of law
- Campaigning to get sustainable jobs for women, especially in rural areas

#### **WIN**

- Better conditions for women migrant workers
  - Equal pay and wages for women in the workplace
-