

BHUTANESE UNION ESTABLISHED WITH JAPANESE SUPPORT

With the assistance and solidarity support of the Japanese Association of Metal, Machinery and Manufacturing Workers (JAM), affiliated to JCM, the International Labor Union of Bhutan (ILUB) was established in Matsuyama, Japan, on 1 September this year.

Lured by unscrupulous labour agents in Bhutan, 700 young Bhutanese students came to Japan with the hope of earning Nu 1.1 million (US\$15,500), working part-time while enrolled in a Japanese language school.

Japan has an ambitious policy of increasing international students to 300,000 by 2020. The Learn and Earn programme is handled by Bhutan Employment Overseas (BEO), a licenced agent appointed by Bhutan's Ministry of Labour, in collaboration with Japanese brokers.

However, in December 2018, the Anti-Corruption Commission of Bhutan urged the government to revoke BEO's licence over allegations that it had illegally received registration certificates without submitting key documents. In addition, BEO's representatives in Japan were not accredited by Bhutan's Ministry of Labour.

Although the Bhutanese government offered a Nu 700,000 (US\$9,800) loan with an 8 per cent interest rate, after paying Nu 130,000 (US\$1,840) for the agent and the tuition fee to Japanese language school, the Bhutanese students were almost out of pocket.

Jobs available to Bhutanese students were limited due to their lack of Japanese. Many ended up working late-night shifts in warehouses and factories.

The students were not allowed to work more than 28 hours per week, and with low wages of US\$9 per hour, many were forced into illegal work.

The pressure that followed was enormous and in 2018 one young student committed suicide.

"When we started to receive calls from the students seeking assistance, we were moved by their courage to overcome their plight. We set up a meeting with the students on 29 July and helped them to register a labour union with Japanese authorities," says Katahiro Yasukochi, JAM president.

Triggered by the support from JAM, the Bhutanese students decided to set up a trade union to protect their rights in a foreign country.

"We did not know about trade unions until we got to know RENGO and JAM, two of Japan's biggest unions. The process to register a trade union was complicated, and JAM helped us with detailed guidelines," says Sharma Robin, ILUB Vice President.

"We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to JAM. Many young Bhutanese were cheated and trapped into financial debt. As ILUB, we will work hard to protect the rights of vulnerable people and low-skilled workers. We will work hard to find stable and decent jobs for our young friends so that they can start a decent and normal life," says Jaganath Koirala, ILUB President.

profile

Union: **The International Labor Union of Bhutan (ILUB)**

Country: **Japan**

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A policy adopted by the Japanese government to address a shortage of labour is part of the problem, where foreign students end up in precarious work, not earning enough to sustain themselves. There is very little social support for these students, as they do not even have the status of migrant workers.

Explaining the challenge ahead, Yasukochi says that JAM has a comprehensive action plan to tackle the problems faced by Bhutanese students.

JAM will collaborate with ILUB to campaign for the refund of unfair fees charged by brokers and entrance fees to Japanese language schools. JAM will also demand that companies improve working conditions for the students.

And JAM will assist ILUB in setting up a branch of the union in Bhutan, as well as to obtain the permission to operate a labour supply business in Japan. This measure will eliminate intermediaries and avoid exploitation.

"Bhutanese young people are extremely talented, highly motivated and idealistic, just like at the beginning of Japan's labour movement. This is the first trade union created by Bhutanese. We must make sure we nurture it and help it grow; we will do our best to make their dreams come true," says Yasukochi.

Japanese and Bhutanese unionists. *JAM*