

# The First Asia-Pacific Solidarity Conference

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**Political parties and groups from across Asia and the Pacific gathered in Sydney, Australia this April for a historic solidarity conference.**

The event was a success, both in terms of the wide range of participants, and the warm spirit which dominated the proceedings. In this era of liberalisation and the east-Asian financial crisis, there is a clear need to rekindle internationalist activities and consciousness. Hence this initiative of Australia's Democratic Socialist Party (DSP).

The conference was an opportunity for in-depth discussions on the economic crisis in Asia, and on the situation of women across the region. There were also numerous side discussions between organisations of very diverse origins, and key moments of solidarity with progressive forces in Indonesia, Australia's sacked dockers, and the struggle for the rights of the continent's Aborigines. Cultural events were organised by communities struggling for self-determination, from East Timor to France's Polynesian colonies.

So many different facets of internationalism. Over 750 people participated, including a large number of young Australians, who had come from all parts of the country to meet the 67 foreign delegations. This was a main contributing factor to the militant dynamism of the conference.

Among the participants from outside the Asia-Pacific region were the FSLN (Nicaragua), Solidarity (USA), United Left (Spain), PDS (Germany), VDP (Turkey), SOV-CWI (Austria), Socialist Party-CWI (Britain) and France's Revolutionary Communist League (LCR). Fourth International supporters from a range of countries were present.

But this was above all a meeting of revolutionary or progressive political parties, independence movements, democratic and feminist groups, trade unions, popular coalitions and personalities from the Asia-Pacific region. Australia's Democratic Socialist Party (who also sponsor Green Left Weekly newspaper and Links theoretical journal) succeeded in attracting delegates from a wide geographical area, including very different countries. The Northern Pacific was represented by the Communist Party of Japan, the South Pacific by Matt Robson, foreign affairs spokesperson of New Zealand's radical Alliance. Others came from South East Asia and the Indian sub-continent.

The conference discussions reflected the great diversity of current popular struggles in the region. Some old, some new, but all reflecting the current situation. Yesterday's democratic struggle against dictatorship is not yet finished, and the resistance against the destructive effects of neoliberal globalisation has already started.

The relatively recent trend towards democratisation' is far from completed. Philippine dictator Marcos was overthrown in 1986, but it is only in the last few months that the regime neighbouring Indonesia has entered into open crisis. The traditional political dominance of the army in has been reduced in Thailand, but, across the border in Myanmar (Burma), the ageing generals are still in dictatorial control. France has still not recognised the

independence of its Polynesian colonies. The Tamils of Sri Lanka still live under military occupation. In a common pattern, political repression goes hand in hand with the crushing of autonomy and self-determination for national minorities. France's continued imperial role in the Pacific, and the ongoing consequences of its nuclear weapons programme in Polynesia were vigorously denounced by Tamara Bopp Du-Pont, a member of the colony's Territorial Assembly, and by other representatives of the Tavini Huiraatira pro-independence movement. Australian Aborigines and Maoris from New Zealand told of the deep oppression which their peoples continue to suffer, as a result of the colonisation of their lands. Representatives of progressive movements from the south-west Pacific islands (Bougainville, Aceh, Papua New Guinea and East Timor) condemned the Indonesian regime's crimes against the people of the archipelago, and western support for Jakarta. One of the most emotional moments of the conference was the joint presentation by representatives of the East Timorese organisation Fretilin, and the Indonesian radical left PRD party. They reaffirmed their solidarity, and spoke of their difficult struggle against the dictatorship. Delegates from South Korea spoke of the coexistence of a decades-old struggles against dictatorship, and a very modern popular reaction to the neo-liberal policies being implemented at the insistence of the International Monetary Fund. The recent election of opposition personality Kim Dae-Jung as president marked a step forward in the dismantling of the former military regime and its institutional heritage. But the new president is implementing IMF policies which have made thousands of workers unemployed, in a country which lacks social security protection. Key sectors of the South Korean economy are increasingly controlled by Japanese and Western economic interests. How to respond to this situation? Call for an immediate general strike against IMF policies? Does the balance of forces make this a realistic strategy? Is it too soon after the election of Kim Dae-jung? This debate has raged inside the militant Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), and provoked dramatic changes in the leadership in February and March. Yoong Young-mo, KCTU International Secretary, explained this complex situation to the Sydney conference, and outlined the new organisational questions facing the Confederation. He discussed the problems involved in unification with the traditionally pro-governmental Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU). He also outlined the KCTU medium-term project for a new labour-type party, an idea also backed by the National Alliance for Democracy and Reunification of Korea (NADRK) and the Alliance for Progressive Policies (APP). Delegates paid particular attention to the diverse nature of women's experiences across the region, and the various movements that have developed in response to women's oppression. There was plenary discussion of the relationship between women's liberation, social struggles and democratic struggles, and workshops on women in the Philippines, the experience of Cambodian and other groups in working against the sex trade in women, and on reproductive rights. The conference created an Asia-Pacific Women's Solidarity Network to ensure permanent networking between feminist organisations present at the conference, and other interested groups. {{{Solidarity meetings}}} In one sense, the Sydney conference was one long series of solidarity meetings". The Asia Pacific region is probably more diverse than any other, in terms of history, culture, language, social structure and political regime. The countries represented varied from small Pacific islands to the Indian giant. Thailand has never been colonised, while the Philippines were conquered by Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This

diversity, however, did not detract from the quality of the exchanges.

Some of the delegates were already in contact with each other (feminist groups, for example, had met at the UN-sponsored conferences in Nairobi and Beijing). Others met in Sydney for the first time. This was particularly striking for the three parties from the Indian sub-continent. The Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation has some 65,000 members, and comes from the rural guerrilla Naxalite tradition. Its representative in Sydney, Member of Parliament Jayanta Rongpi, held long discussions with Mohammed Shoib Akber, president of Pakistan's Labour Party, which is part of the CWI grouping around Britain's Socialist Party (formerly Militant), and with Sunil Ratnapriya, who co-ordinates international work for Sri Lanka's New Socialist Party (NSSP), which is part of the Fourth International. The three parties are currently preparing a similar conference focused on the South Asia region: encouraging illustration of the dynamic of solidarity generated by the Sydney conference.

The political focus of the conference was on South-East Asia. Not just because of the wide range of delegates from those countries (including Thailand's Poor People's Assembly, the Cambodian Women's Development Agency, the Malaysian People's Party, Indonesia's PRD and Fretelin from East Timor). But also because of the important questions facing progressive forces there. The Communist Party of the Philippines was for many years the most influential revolutionary organisation in the region. Now that it is in severe crisis, many revolutionaries are rethinking their strategy and politics.

Inevitably, the crisis in Indonesia and the need for solidarity were at the centre of delegates' concerns.

The current neoliberal straitjacket imposed on the countries of the region in this age of globalisation make it very unlikely that Indonesia's problems will be solved'' by a democratic transition along the lines of the Philippines experience after 1987. It is more likely that the situation in Indonesia will continue to rot. Because of the country's vast size and geopolitical and economic importance, this will inevitably have a destabilising effect on the whole region. Continued repression of opponents to the regime will make Indonesia solidarity particularly important, something the Australian left has long realised, and which should now be developed in all other countries. Philippine delegates stressed their desire to work together, after a period of splits and fragmentation following the implosion of the Communist Party of the Philippines. That disintegration continues, but new networks of co-operation are forming, seemingly as fast as the splits take place! Two of these new coalitions participated in the Sydney conference. The national-democratic federation Sanlakas, and the Akbayan People's Party are specifically electoral organisations. Apart from the continuing'' Communist Party, these two coalitions regroup most of the components of the radical left, including groups which come from the CP, and groups like BISIG, which have a different history. While they discussed the high and low points of their experiences in a frank and friendly way, they agreed on one thing that serves as a warning to all those fighting the neoliberal globalisation: where the forces of the left retreat, the political space is quickly occupied by more or less religious movements, which are often very skilled at manipulating the population.

## Perspectives

The organisers of the Sydney conference want to ensure that the links made here are maintained and developed. They hope to prepare a second conference in the same spirit.

As in other parts of the world, inter-governmental and UN conferences are increasingly used as a focus of initiatives to articulate the voices of those below'. But, as elsewhere, the agenda and membership of these events are largely dictated by the agenda of the official conference''. In Japan, in particular, Parc-Amp has organised a series of international meetings to elaborate elements of a popular alternative to the dominant neo-liberal project. But there has been little space for radical political parties to be represented in their own right.

And the general evolution of the sphere of Non Governmental Organisations'' is increasingly problematic. There is a risk that many NGOs will be integrated into the system which they claim to criticise. The Sydney conference was not the first attempt to bring together more radical voices. In the 1970s the Japanese Revolutionary Communist League (4th International) initiated a series of Asian Youth Conferences''. But times have changed, and it is clear that the Sydney initiative has regrouped a much wider range of organisations than previous initiatives. In the face of a difficult international context, a bewildering geographical and political diversity across the region, the Sydney conference was a real success. The enthusiastic participation of so many political parties, coalitions, fronts and associations confirms the rebirth of the internationalist spirit. Good news!

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### P.S.

\* Posted on Green Left Weekly website.

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