

*Viet-Nam Info Series No.12*

# VIET-NAM BULLETIN

A WEEKLY PUBLICATION OF THE EMBASSY OF VIET-NAM  
2251 "R" Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008 (Telephone: 234-4860)

*FISHERMEN OF VIET-NAM (10-69)*





*Strength in unity...*

# FISHERMEN OF VIETNAM

In the Western world, when a trade union organizer approaches a worker with the suggestion that he join the union, the organizer usually is asked: «How much will it cost me? Who's running it? Will I have to go out on strike?»

But when an organizer, in the Republic of Vietnam—a *can bo* for one of the 16 local unions of the Federation of Fishermen, for instance—approaches a South Vietnamese with an invitation to join the union, he usually is asked: «What is a union?»

Despite such elemental obstacles to union recruiting—along with communist opposition, job-destroying warfare, and vestiges of feudal-era distrust of the common man's sagacity—the Federation of Fishermen has grown in five years to a membership of 65,000, the second largest union in the country.

The Fishermen belong to the Vietnamese Confederation of Labor (CVT), whose half-million members make it the largest non-governmental mass membership organization in the Republic. The CVT is making its influence felt in a number of fields, but many Vietnamese still must ask the question, «What is a union?» For the concept of trade unionism—the idea of job security through unity—is still very new to Vietnam. The labor movement is less than 20 years old. It has suffered harassment from both the left and the right for most of its existence. And 6,500,000 men and women of the nation's work force remain unrepresented by any union.

The Vietnamese labor movement is unique in other respects:

\* Types of workers who rarely can be organized in other countries

have the strongest unions in Vietnam—tenant farmers (130,000 members), fishermen (65,000) and plantation workers (16,150).

\* Organized workers, instead of leaning politically left as they do in much of the Western world, tend to oriental conservatism reflecting their predominantly rural roots, and form a bulwark of vigorous anti-communism in South Vietnam.

\* The labor movement, instead of confining itself to bread-and-butter unionism devoted only to the interests of union members, has a social conscience that has sparked one of the nation's biggest welfare program, benefiting union and non-union members alike.

\* Organized labor, instead of regarding strikes and picket lines as evidence of a young movement's

organizational effectiveness and as means toward achieving labor's ends, more often acts in Vietnam as peacemaker in avoiding or ending labor-management strife.

\* Labor unions, which in the West bring the weight of their power to bear principally on management, concentrate in Vietnam on influencing government — province and district chiefs and corps commanders at the operating level, legislators and central government executives at the policy level. For management is not yet the prime locus of power in Vietnamese industry.

#### Hope for Future

Because the attitude of government has so strongly affected the rise and fall of unions in Vietnam, future of the trade union movement promise to be a better one, for today's realistic government in Saigon is more liberal toward unionization than any previous one. No longer does the central government, as it did in the days of the French colonialists, outlaw Vietnamese union activity while condoning unions for French workers in Vietnam. No longer does the Saigon government, as it did in the days of President Ngo Dinh Diem, ban unions advocating such objectives as land tenure and reduced land rentals, or harass union organizers, or subsidize rival «company» unions. No longer does the government, as it did under the 1965 regime of General Nguyen Khanh, touch off general strikes by forbidding unions to hold meetings. Nor does management today automatically expect to receive unquestioning police support in times of labor disputes.

One reason why the government of President Nguyen Van Thieu and Prime Minister Tran Van Huong is favorably disposed toward the labor movement is that the CVT — which forms the overwhelmingly dominant part of the labor movement — has demonstrated through the years that it is an independent, growing force for national progress. It is the one major nonpartisan group to have survived two decades of political crises, the one stable force in Vietnam's shifting political and social



Phan Thiet's public market has large area reserved for sale of fish. Sixty per cent of catch is sold as fresh fish, rest made into sauce.

... future looks good

scene, and the best organized group communicating directly with a large and relatively vocal segment of the population.

Vietnamese labor today not only is incontestably anti-communist, but has a stronger political voice than ever before. The CVT in the past two years has nullified the ban on political activity once written into its constitution. It has urged members to vote, it has put forward slates of candidates for national office, it has counseled statesmen and legislators on public issues, and particularly in the past few months it has taken firm public stands—not always conventional—on political problems of the day.

With close to half a million members, the CVT is recognized by the government's more far-sighted leaders as a potential source of organizers—men and women already imbued with a strong social conscience—that could bolster the government's Revolutionary Development program «to win the minds and hearts of the people.» Labor's followers could be an even more potent force for progress not only in the hamlets where the RD program was started, but in the urban workers' districts where events since the communists' Tet offensive have underscored the advisability of countering communist subversion attempts.

#### Urban and Rural

The Federation of Fishermen has local unions in such large cities as Saigon, Da Nang, Vung Tau, Qui Nhon and Can Tho, and it has unions in smaller ports—seaports and river ports—like Phan Thiet, Phan Rang, Rach Gai and Long Xuyen. Among provinces with Fishermen's locals are Quang Nam, Quang Tin, Khanh Hoa, Ninh Thuan, Binh Tuy, Quang Ngai, Chau Doc and Phuoc Tuy. Eleven of the 16 unions have more than 1,000 members each.

The Federation of Fishermen was organized in August 1963 with headquarters at Da Nang, but soon moved to Phan Thiet, 160 kilometers northeast of Saigon on the South China Sea, where it is now headed by Secretary General Tran Khac Luc. Membership before the end of the Federation's first year

## Federation of fishermen second largest union

had climbed to 40,000 and organization was proceeding smoothly, but by mid-1965 membership plummeted to 10,000. This «period of decline,» as the union's historic records call it, coincided not only with an upsurge in Viet Cong military successes but with the chaotic political period prior to General Thieu's rise to power, a period that saw a procession of short-lived governments in Saigon, many of them hostile to labor. But with increased security accompanying the stepped-up U.S. military activities, stabilization of the political scene, help from the CVT and a determined recruiting campaign, the Fishermen pushed their «period of development» so vigorously that by the end of 1967 membership hovered near 80,000. It dropped to 65,000 by mid-1968 because of worsened security conditions resulting from the communists' winter-spring offensive. Throughout the history of Vietnam's labor movement, there has been a direct correlation between membership and security conditions. When warfare or communist oppression eliminates jobs, membership drops.

Helping probably more than any other single project to boost membership, spread the Federation's reputation for effectiveness and give the entire labor movement a stake in social welfare was an emergency cargo-carrying project launched in mid-1965. At that time, because the Viet Cong had cut a number of rail lines and highways, some provincial towns were unable to get such essential commodities as rice, medicines and diesel oil. Without oil, diesel generators could not produce the electricity needed for water supply. The Agency for International Development (U.S. AID) approached the Federation of Fishermen with the proposal that its members' fishing junks be made available in off-times for hauling such vital cargoes to their destinations. Junk skippers in Da Nang volunteered to join such an emergency fleet,

and were soon followed by the organized fishermen of Saigon and Phan Thiet. The Viet Cong bottleneck was broken.

Under terms of the agreement, the Federation took 10 percent of gross income earned in the cargo-carrying project and started a union welfare fund. This provided the seed capital for the establishment of a national fishermen's credit union. Fishermen traditionally are lifetime debtors, so a credit union to them was the means of freeing themselves and their families from the village moneylender who had long dominated their economic, social and even political lives.

The cargo-carrying project enabled the Federation to hire more *can bo*, so membership increased as these new organizers went out into the provinces. The project also provided the funds for the union's establishment of three social welfare centers in the Phan Thiet area. There are 28 CVT centers in Vietnam now. They offer adult and primary education, help for the sick, funeral expenses, low-cost canteens, and sewing lessons, along with hamlet social service projects and branch credit union facilities in some areas.

#### Federation Growth

The Federation of Fishermen's growth in 1967 produced the largest percentage increase of any CVT union. Even more significant, dues-paying members in the Federation rose from 2,830 to 25,840. The gap between total membership and dues-paying membership reflects a custom probably unique to the Vietnamese labor movement: a new union member pays no dues until his personal income increases as a direct result of his union membership. Not until he receives tangible benefits from his union does he pay dues. And even then they are nominal—an average of 20 piasters (US\$0.17) per month.





Sea catch is sold right on the dock at Phan Thiet as soon as it is unloaded from the boats.

### Phan Thiet Market

Phan Thiet, where the Fishermen have their headquarters, is a typical provincial port illustrating typical union problems. But making it somewhat different from other ports is the fact that Phan Thiet is known as the *nuoc mam* capital of the world. No Vietnamese has ever sat down to a regular meal without *nuoc mam*, that pungent fish sauce, on the table. There are more *nuoc mam* producing factories in Phan Thiet than anywhere else, and these private factory owners dominate the fish market. As the boat owners' best customers, and bolstered by a fleet of their own boats, they can — and do — set prices for the catches. At

least 40 percent of each catch goes into the manufacture of *nuoc mam*. The rest of the catch goes on sale locally or is available for transport to the Saigon markets 160 kilometers away. But pending establishment of a refrigerated trucking service between Phan Thiet and Saigon — a project now being considered for financing by U.S. AID — much of the fresh-fish catch must be sold locally. Spoiled fish — and fresh fish offered for sale to nonexistent local buyers soon becomes spoiled fish — ends up in the *nuoc mam* factories. This problem of lack of transportation facilities between the fishing dock and out-of-province markets is not confined to Phan Thiet, but is a nationwide problem.

### Cooperative Plan

To break the *nuoc mam* factory owners' stranglehold on the local market, Phan Thiet fishermen would like their union to establish a cooperative to run their own *nuoc mam* factory. Such a project would require capital of about 20 million piasters (US\$170,000) to establish a hiring house, advance money to boat owners, buy hydro-motorboats and fish transportation boats, hire managers and workers, and purchase salt and other materials necessary for sauce manufacture. Nor is procurement of capital the union's only problem in pushing such a project through to completion: the *nuoc mam* factory owners, through their economic power, have achieved a good deal

of political power, and are reluctant to relinquish power of any kind. A Fishermen's cooperative for Phan Thiet is on the drawing boards, but it is not yet in sight.

The idea of trade union members forming cooperatives to engage in private enterprise in competition with established entrepreneurs is not alien to the world's labor movement—as witness Israel's success in just such a program—nor is it unprecedented in Vietnam. In Rach Gia, in the Mekong Delta on the shore of the Gulf of Siam, there already is a fishermen's cooperative. But it is a fishermen's co-op more in name than in fact, for the actual controllers of the co-op are the boat owners and the fish-processing factory owners, and the price paid for the fish catch remains low.

The 18-month-old Fishermen's union in Rach Gia, headed by Do Minh Toan, 46, is trying to correct the situation by getting its members to join the co-op in sufficient numbers to have a stronger say in marketing matters. But this campaign is lagging because of the local union's inability to recruit more members. Out of 20,000 fishermen in Kien Giang province,

only 400 are Fishermen's union members, for the government still has not approved the union's 11-month-old application for a license, and until that license is forthcoming, the union is not «legal» and must restrict the number of its members. By such red tape are labor's problems in Vietnam so often compounded.

### Training Program

One of the vital needs of the Fishermen's union in Rach Gia and throughout the country is training of union members, organizers and officials in all aspects of unionism. Rach Gia was chosen as the site of the most recent training seminar in an effort to show those in power—local government officials, co-op directors and factory owners—that the Fishermen's local there is a going concern and no fly-by-night aggregation. A 25-day seminar, one that attracted more than 50 *can bo* and officials of the Federation from 22 provinces, had an agenda with the unwieldy but informative title: «Training Course on Cooperatives and Trade Unionism held at Rach Gia from June 4 to June 28, 1968,

organized by the Vietnamese Federation of Fishermen, financially sponsored by CORDS (the U.S. agency for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support), Region IV, with the cooperation of the CVT and the technical assistance of the U.S. AID Labor Division.»

Held at the CVT Provincial Trade Union headquarters in the Kien Giang provincial capital, the seminar placed heavy emphasis on how to operate a cooperative, with lectures ranging from «What Are Cooperatives?» to «Cooperative Bookkeeping.» Other items on the agenda included the interests and duties of fishermen, the techniques of communication, the operation and maintenance of boat motors, and even—for leisure-time guidance—the theory and regulations of volleyball.

According to the Rach Gia local's chief, Do Minh Toan, the seminar not only gave more ammunition to the Fishermen's *can bo* in their recruiting drives, but helped demonstrate to the provincial powers-that-be that his tiny local is backed by a powerful national Federation. Already, he says, more provincial officials are opening their doors to him.

Toan heads a local in an area where union members and organizers in the past have been victims of Viet Cong assassination. Toan says he has seen Viet Cong cadres out in fishing boats, posing as fishermen but actually spying for local and regional Viet Cong military units. Always, he says, he has promptly informed South Vietnamese officials, for he makes no bones about the fact that he is not intimidated by the communists. Toan has a wife and three children, but he denounces the enemy at every opportunity. And he sees nothing particularly heroic in such an attitude. «All Fishermen's union officials do the same throughout the country,» he says. And he may not be exaggerating much.

Toan and all other members of his union have been thoroughly investigated by government security agencies as part of the procedure necessary to obtain a license for the union in Rach Gia, and all





Organizers and officials of the Federation of Fishermen from 22 provinces attend 25-day seminar.

have come up with clean bills of health. This slow procedure is common to many new locals in Vietnam, for neither the government, the Federation of Fishermen nor the CVT wants to expand union membership so rapidly that Viet Cong cadres could infiltrate labor's ranks. The CVT's unions highly regard their reputation as bastions against the spread of communism, and want to take no measures that might weaken their vigorous anti-Viet Cong position.

Toan meanwhile has experimented with recruiting measures that now are gaining acceptance in other port areas of Vietnam. He is showing informative motion pictures in the town square — documentary movies on cooperatives, on the role of labor in a democratic society, and many other union-oriented films obtained from U.S. and other labor sources. To

many Vietnamese, these movies are the first concrete answer they have received to the question, «What is a union?»

#### More Benefits

Meanwhile, the work of bread-and-butter unionism goes on. Most Fishermen's unions within the past year have signed contracts calling for a 50-50 split of the catch between fishermen and boat owners. And the more powerful of the unions, such as Da Nang, have succeeded in negotiating a 60-40 split, in favor of the fishermen. In addition, the Da Nang union has been successful in convincing the military that areas previously forbidden to them for security reasons now can be fished, and catches have risen appreciably as a result. Curfew hours for fishermen also have been liberalized to permit longer periods at sea. None of

these benefits could have been obtained without the strength that unity provided. And now these benefits are being extended, not only to Da Nang's 10,000 Fishermen's union members but to all men of the province whose livelihood is dependent on bringing food from the sea.

And so it goes around the country — slow but steady progress. A better contract here, a relaxation of restrictions there, more piasters in the pocket of the average fisherman, more welfare benefits for him, his wife and his children. More and better *can bo* are being hired, trained and sent into the provinces to recruit more fishermen for the union. More official doors are opening to union representatives. Fewer people now must ask, «What is a union?»

The future looks good for the Federation of Fishermen.

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U. S. POSTAGE PAID Washington, DC Permit No. 41866
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BULK RATE

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