

# INTO President learns about radical education reforms on Cambodia visit

On arrival at Siem Reap International Airport on the evening of 27 November, we were warmly welcomed by the staff and their families of the empowering youth organisation, PEPY. It was a colourful and joyous start to a memorable trip I made alongside INTO President John Driscoll.

Many of those who came to the airport had visited Ireland, having taken part in the exchange programme with Donabate/Portrane Educate Together NS (DPETNS) and other schools over an eight-year period. Included in the welcoming group were former DPETNS Principal Maeve Corish and her husband Liam, who had been working in Cambodia for a few weeks with PEPY.

The purpose of the visit to Cambodia was to reconnect with INTO partner organisations post-Covid, and show our support for their initiatives in a meaningful way.

## Fraught history

During the visit, we met three organisations: PEPY, See Beyond Borders (SBB) and the Cambodian Independent Teachers Association (CITA). Each in their own way contribute to the massive challenge of transitioning the Cambodian education system from the current situation of low-salaried teachers, poorly-resourced schools and a rote-based learning model.

We had the opportunity to learn about Cambodia's fraught history. We learned about the Cambodian empire of 1000 years ago and of the French occupation, the struggle for independence and of course the devastating impact on society, including on the education system, of the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s.

Education was considered unnecessary by the Khmer Rouge, and only primary level education was provided on a very limited basis and without any professional



L-R: INTO President John Driscoll; Blung Phath, Country Manager SBB Cambodia; Rin Makara, HR Manager, SBB Cambodia; Senior Official/ Global Solidarity Officer John O'Brien, presenting the INTO's *Kindling the Flame*

teachers. Almost 90% of the teaching profession were either killed or fled the country during this period.

It is against this backdrop that the current innovators and campaigners for renewal of the education system work and with considerable success.

## Innovation

Meeting with SBB, we learned of the in-class innovations they develop and promote and the provision of unique CPD in relation to literacy and maths teaching in public schools in the Siem Reap and Battambang areas of east Cambodia.

We were delighted to hear that SBB are working with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport to mainstream these innovations. It is hoped the Cambodian Minister for Education will visit Ireland within the next 12 months.

PEPY programmes concentrate on secondary school pupils and their access to higher education. Currently, for many young people from rural backgrounds, the idea of seeking a third-level qualification is remote if not impossible both socially and financially.

We were fortunate to meet some of these hard-working pupils, their teachers and their proud parents. Many of these

pupils act as role models and trailblazers for education in their families and communities.

## Imprisonment and challenges

The meeting with the officers of the teachers' union CITA reminded the president and I of the fact that not all countries accept the reality of teachers' unions and their representatives in a positive light.

We met the current and former presidents of CITA, Ouk Chhayavy and Rong Chhun. Mr Rong has been imprisoned and suffered the loss of his registration as a teacher for his support and organisation of basic trade union actions such as challenging the government to improve education standards and lobbying for the improvement of the terms and conditions of teachers in Cambodia.

In solidarity, the INTO president pledged support from our union to each of the three organisations, to help financially when it is feasible, but more importantly, to promote their work amongst the INTO membership at home and at all levels available to us.

**JOHN O'BRIEN, INTO Senior Official and Global Solidarity Officer.**

## Teachers' Musical Society returns with a 'flush'!

The Teachers' Musical Society is staging *Urinetown; The Musical* this coming March. The plot of this award-winning musical centres around a Gotham-like city where a 20-year drought has led the government to ban the use of private toilets!

People are forced to pay to use public facilities managed by a malevolent corporation... but the

hero, Bobby Strong, starts a revolution to free the pee! A tale of greed, corruption, rebellion, murder, love, hope and a healthy dose of silly humour, this musical satire will delight and entertain audiences when it bursts onto the stage. The show opens at 7.30pm on Tuesday, 28 March and runs nightly until Saturday, 1 April in DCU, St Patrick's campus, Drumcondra. Tickets, €20, via [gr8events.ie](http://gr8events.ie)

