

Aussie Union Goes to Bat for Beer Girls
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In late April Canadian Ian Lubek was trolling Siem Reap's beer gardens and, like other patrons, chatting up the beer promotion girls about their drinking and commercial sexual habits.

But Lubek wasn't looking to score a quiet rendezvous after a night of sweet talk over jugs of the brew.

Instead, with breathalyzer in hand, the university professor was gathering evidence on how much alcohol these young women consumed – sometimes unwillingly – while working around their hard-drinking customers.

Thousands of miles away, at the same time Lubek was making his rounds of the local watering holes, brewing giant Heineken was holding its annual general meeting in Holland.

It was there that Heineken CEO Jean Francois van Boxmeer delivered a stinging rebuke to the professor, dismissing his data on how much alcohol was drunk by, in particular, Heineken promotion girls.

Through his research, Lubek, a doctor of psychology at Canada's Guelph University, hopes to pressure brewing companies for better workplace protections for promotion girls who commonly drink more than a liter of beer a night, most importantly by implementing rules that prevent them from drinking on the job at all.

But his battle for the sobriety of Cambodia's promotion girls has placed him on the frontline of an intensifying battle between breweries and advocates who say alcohol producers, including international companies, are complicit in the exploitation of these young women.

The growing row has attracted the attention of Australia's most powerful trade union, the Australian Council of Trade Unions, or ACTU, which through its humanitarian arm APHEDA has already made efforts to organize garment and hotel workers in Cambodia, and is now starting to try and introduce mandatory work contracts for beer girls.

"We ... take all our statistics about how much the women are drinking and how dangerous the workplace is right to the beer companies themselves," Lubek told the *Post*.

"I've delivered talks to the directors at Heineken headquarters in Amsterdam twice, to Carlsberg in Copenhagen and other countries to inform them of the

dangers we're finding in the workplace.”

Without the cooperation of beer producers, the ACTU could take the issue to international union delegates in Geneva.

"This is a really important issue and needs national and international exposure to ensure the companies live up to their responsibilities as good employers," the ACTU's international officer, Alison Tate, told the *Post* from Melbourne.

Promotion girls, whose livelihood depends on how much beer they sell, often find themselves coerced into night-long booze sessions that can end in sexual assault or other violence.

More regularly, these women often resort to prostitution to supplement their incomes, which hover around \$60 a month, leaving them socially stigmatized and vulnerable to sexually transmitted disease.

"We had this issue before where in one of the Dutch newspapers we published our findings at that point and we said the beer girls are drinking over one liter, 1.3 liters or whatever a night," Lubek said.

"A Heineken representative then said 'Professor Lubek is wrong because it's against company policy for any beer girl to drink,'" he added.

"Then last year at the annual general meeting they promised to clear up the problem, and now they're saying they don't believe my data anyway.”

Heineken International's head of group corporate relations, Dr. Gijsbert J. Siertsema, defended van Boxmeer's pointed comments, saying no information has ever been presented to back up Lubek's claims of alcohol abuse among promotion girls.

"During our AGM one of the attendees mentioned a number of figures related to beer promoters, but those figures were not supported by further background information or evidence," he told the *Post* from Amsterdam.

"In that sense, our CEO indicated that he did not know the background of those figures," Siertsema said, adding that Heineken has taken the lead on industry reform, creating the "Selling Beer Safely" program that includes, among other things, training, wage raises and arrangements to take promotion girls to and from work.

"As for our policy regarding beer promoters, we are very clear: BPs (beer promoters) should not sit or drink with consumers," he said.

However, those policies have little to do with the reality of Cambodia's beer gardens, advocates say, where there is little visible evidence of regulation but plenty of instances of on-the-job drinking, harassment and even abuse.

"Our concern is to emphasise the need for proper wages, conditions and

safety and respect to be formalized in the employment contract and in the relevant labour law,” said the ACTU’s Tate.

“The ACTU has worked with the international union that represents the brewery industry, the International Union of Food Workers, based in Geneva, to engage brewery companies at headquarters levels to promote workers conditions by trying to establish basic wages and conditions by insisting on the provision of contracts for beer promotion workers.”