

Thompsons Solicitors: Our international work



T THOMPSONS
SOLICITORS

THE MOST EXPERIENCED
TRADE UNION FIRM IN THE UK

www.thompsons.law.co.uk

AROUND THE WORLD

Thompsons Solicitors is committed to working with unions, pushing the boundaries of employment rights and achieving justice for trade union members, not just in the UK but all around the world. In line with our vision and values, we strive to use our experience in this country to support and help workers elsewhere. Our strong affiliation with UK unions has been crucial to our achievements internationally.

As the most experienced personal injury firm in the UK with over 800 staff in a network of offices nationwide, we fight hard to secure the maximum amount of compensation in the shortest possible time for our clients. Thompsons only works for injured people and, unlike some other solicitors, will never work for insurance companies or employers.



SOUTH AFRICA

Using our expertise and financial backing, South African miners and their families won a landmark £45 million settlement in 2003 from companies that had ruthlessly exploited their labour throughout the apartheid years.

Despite knowledge of the lethal dangers of asbestos, mining companies continued to excavate the mineral exposing thousands of men, women and children and condemning them to long term illness and terminal cancer.

Come the end of apartheid, the companies closed their mining operations and hoped to slip away with the profits. The litigation by Thompsons made them face up to some of their responsibilities.

Thompsons have now set their sights on another mining company from whom we aim to recover further millions in compensation for miners and their families.

Following the first settlements Thompsons helped South African lawyers (who they had worked with) to set up a law firm. The firm has offices in Johannesburg and the same guiding principles as Thompsons.



As well as processing claims to the trust funds set up as a result of the successful asbestos cases, they continue to fight for justice for working people in South Africa.

Working with the same lawyers as before, Thompsons are preparing a claim for the Constitutional Court in South Africa, challenging the parallel systems of benefits for workers suffering from silicosis. One covers mineworkers (mainly black) and the other covers workers in other industries (mainly white). No prizes for guessing which pays out more.

Thompson's is going to argue that it is both unconstitutional and discriminatory to have two systems of benefit running side by side for the same condition, but which pay out different amounts.

Then there are the outstanding claims of miners who contracted silicosis due to poor ventilation in the shafts. There can be little doubt that the mine owners knew about the vital need for good ventilation and knew that what they provided was inadequate at the time. And they could have done something about it.

The possibility of pursuing those claims remains under consideration whilst Thompsons concentrate on the remaining asbestos mining company and the constitutional court challenge.



INDIA

Thompsons has had meetings with GMB and a delegation of Indian trade unionists involved in trying to organise and represent the workforce in the shipbreaking industry in Mumbai.

Workers – who are paid a pittance - break ships without any protection and remove dangerous materials by hand. They are not given any safety equipment, despite the fact that the ships are full of asbestos and other hazardous chemicals.

In a country with massive poverty workers are prepared to gamble their health in return for a job, even for as little as a dollar a day. Unionisation of a transitory and hugely poor workforce is an uphill struggle.

To complicate matters further, it is very difficult for the unions to establish ownership of the vessels and of the companies who employ the workers because of the corporate practice of hiding behind a trail of “shell” companies. It can take the unions a long time to unravel this multi-layered facade, by which stage the owners may well have sold on.

Thompsons has pledged its support to continue working with GMB to offer advice on strategies which may be adopted to confront this callous exploitation of ship breaking workers.



CUBA

Thompsons has worked extensively with the trade union movement and the Cuba Solidarity Campaign in defence of the Cuban people's right to self determination, against the illegal US blockade, and for the freedom of the unjustly imprisoned Miami Five.

Despite its size, Cuba has established a model health service and education system, and is an inspiration to all concerned in the way it protects its public sector. It offers international solidarity throughout Latin America and around the world, and is able to send doctors where they are needed.

When the Soviet Union collapsed and Cuba faced enormous difficulties, Thompsons worked with UNISON and other unions to deliver much needed supplies, and in particular ambulances, to the Cuban health service.

The links established then and since have been used to work with individual unions and the TUC to develop solidarity work with the CTC (the Cuban equivalent of the TUC), and with other Latin American countries who support Cuba.

Thompsons fully supports the campaign to secure the freedom of the Miami Five, and is working with other human rights lawyers and with the trade union movement in the UK and elsewhere to assist the campaign in the USA.

By way of celebration of the 50th anniversary of the revolution and the 70th anniversary of the founding of the CTC, a number of Thompsons' staff are involved in a cycle ride across the country to raise funds for vital educational equipment for Cuba's schools.



COLOMBIA

Colombia is the most dangerous place in the world to be a trade unionist - more are killed there every year than anywhere else in the world combined. In the vast majority of cases, no one is ever held accountable. Cases of forced displacement, disappearances and arbitrary arrest have also risen dramatically in recent years.

Political prisoners

Thompsons has been working to support political prisoners in Colombia, in particular through working with the NGO Justice for Colombia in their political prisoner campaign.

This resulted in the freeing of a number of trade union activists held unjustly, in appalling conditions, by the Colombian authorities, including Nieves Mayusa, Carmen Mayusa and Fanny Perdomo who were released in July 2008.

Our efforts to help in the release of prisoners included working with regional trade unions and trades councils. Steering committees were established and letters were sent to MPs together with letters to the Colombian Embassy and the Foreign Office. The campaign was supported throughout the firm and many of Thompsons staff became actively involved.

There are however hundreds of political prisoners still in prison in Colombia, many jailed for several years without being convicted of any crime. The Justice for Colombia and Thompsons campaign therefore continues and is concentrating its efforts on four new prisoners.



Fensuagro

Fensuagro is Colombia's second largest trade union. It is also one of the most persecuted, having had hundreds of its members assassinated. Thompsons is working with Justice for Colombia and Unite funding a long-term project to strengthen Fensuagro's human rights department and to set up a legal department for the union.

Fourteen trade unionists have already been released from jail as a result of the project and it has provided legal assistance to dozens of imprisoned Fensuagro members.

The project has enabled the union to strengthen its human rights department by paying half the salary of a staff member for a year, paying some of the office bills and increasing its IT capacity – vital for documenting and publicising information about abuses. The department was also able to organise a series of seminars and workshops for members to increase understanding of the issues the union faces.



Fecode

Fecode (the teachers' union) is the largest trade union in Colombia. However, because a thousand teacher trade unionists have been murdered in recent years, recruitment is a real problem.

The union approached Justice for Colombia to help with a recruitment campaign by showing newly qualified teachers the importance of being in a trade union. The project was sponsored by the three British teaching unions ATL, NASUWT, NUT and Thompsons.

The project is funding a series of regional seminars with more than 3,000 teachers attending around the country, as well as other recruitment and organising work such as buying time on local radio stations to raise awareness of the union and the benefits of joining.

Torture victims

This project, sponsored by Thompsons, CWU, NIPSA and GMB southern region, has been run in partnership with the Permanent Committee for the Defence of Human Rights, the largest and one of the oldest human rights organisations in Colombia.

Professional psychologists, post-trauma therapists and social workers have been engaged to work with displaced people and their families who have been victims of violence. The majority of those benefiting from the project were active in trade unions or other social organisations before being displaced.



General

Thompsons was involved with the Law Society and Justice for Colombia in organising a successful conference about a humanitarian exchange of prisoners, which it is hoped may be the first step towards peace in Colombia.

Thompsons' lawyers also took part in a delegation that went to Colombia in August 2008 as part of a Law Society initiative to investigate the situation faced by Colombian human rights lawyers.

The firm supports many fringe meetings at conferences and speaks on platforms to highlight the plight of trade unionists in Colombia. It uses its connections in parliament to lobby on behalf of the trade unionists in Colombia ensuring that their plight is raised in both the UK and European Parliament.



PALESTINE

Thompsons' partners took part in a delegation in 2008 that went to the Occupied Palestinian Territories to see first hand what was going on. The week long trip took them to the West Bank cities of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Nablus Hebron and Haifa as well as other towns and villages.

It was a harrowing trip with people from Thompsons being forcibly ejected by the illegal settlers. Delegation members reported that they were shocked at the extremes of human rights abuses, lawlessness, and cruelty inflicted by the Israeli armed forces and the West Bank Jewish settlers on the Palestinian people.

As a consequence, Thompsons decided to affiliate to the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) and has since raised awareness of the desperate situation of the people in the occupied territories by speaking out about human rights abuses when it can.

This project is new for the firm, but it has received significant support from Thompsons staff with many of them getting involved in local PSC groups and attending protests in London and elsewhere.

VENEZUELA

One of Thompsons' senior partners attended Caracas at the invitation of the President to act as a legal observer during elections.

The firm also works with the Venezuela Information Centre (a UK based campaign group) which seeks to highlight and correct inaccuracies and distortions made about Venezuela in the press and other media.



**For further information please call
0808 100 8050
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