

SEPTEMBER 2019

BUILDING SOLIDARITY WITH RIO TINTO WORKERS IN MADAGASCAR

The Steelworkers Humanity Fund develops long-term partnerships with unions and organizations from contexts that are sometimes so different from ours that it can be hard to know where to start. But a common ingredient is always the sharing of core values such as justice and solidarity. This is the case with our most recent project in Madagascar.

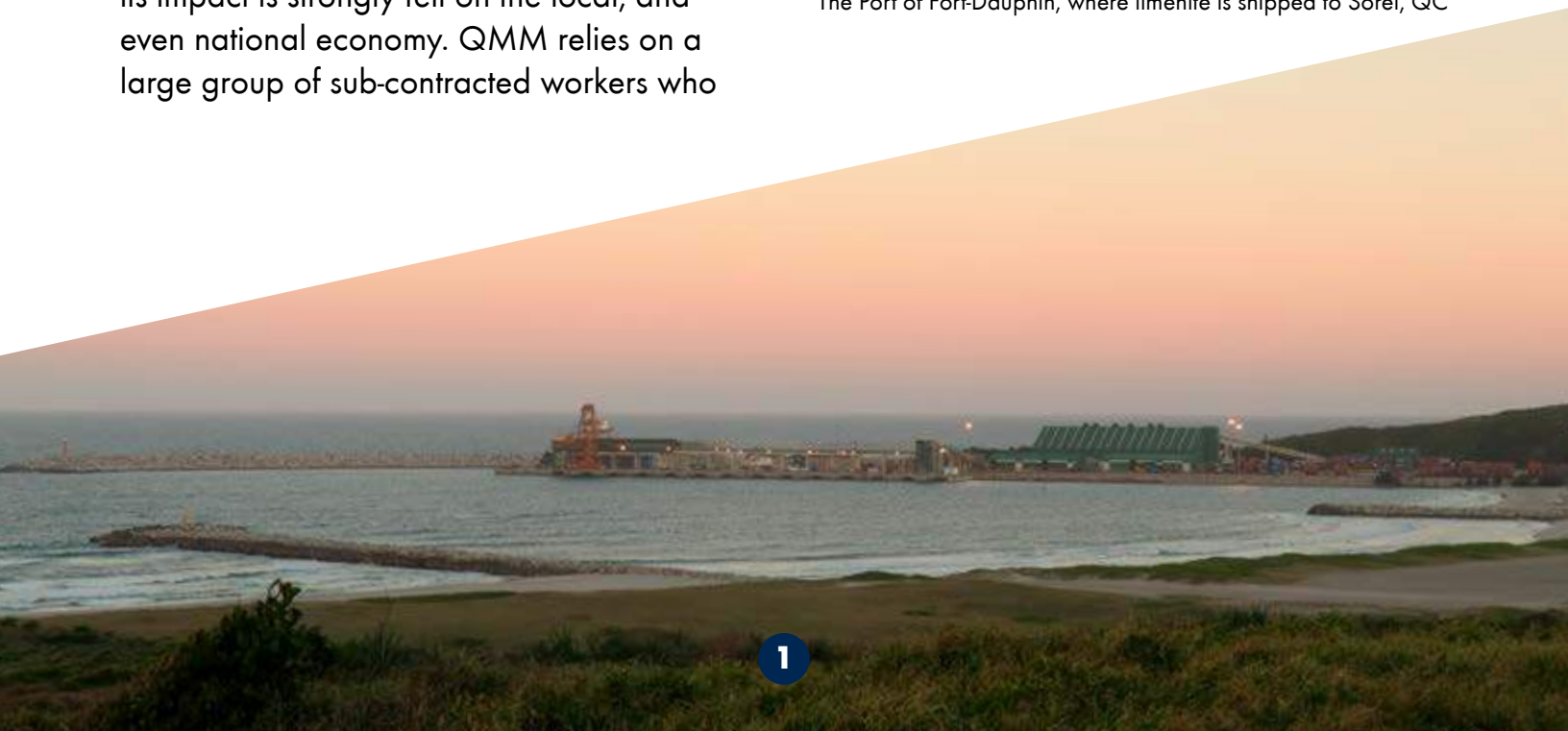


The lemur, Madagascar's emblematic animal

QMM is a subsidiary of the multinational Rio Tinto. It operates an ilmenite mine in Fort-Dauphin, a town located at the southern tip of Madagascar, one of the poorest countries in Africa. The company generates hundreds of direct and indirect jobs, and its impact is strongly felt on the local, and even national economy. QMM relies on a large group of sub-contracted workers who

do not receive the same wages and benefits as permanent employees. In this context, building union power is not easy. But in Madagascar, one of the biggest challenges lies in the labour code itself, which allows for the existence of more than one union in a single workplace. This means that workers wanting to unionize are faced with an important challenge right from the beginning, as unions compete for membership.

The Port of Fort-Dauphin, where ilmenite is shipped to Sorel, QC





Anthony (SEKRIMA) and Eugene (SVS)

Eugene and Anthony were elected as the heads of their respective unions at the QMM mine. But rather than competing, they encourage their members to work together in order to overcome the many challenges they face. Indeed, SVS (Eugene's organization) members are mainly employees of the mine's many subcontractors, and their working conditions are not administered under a collective agreement. For its part, SEKRIMA (Anthony's union) mainly represents the direct employees of the company who are covered by a CBA, although it's far from perfect. To build a balance of power vis-à-vis their employer, the two unions absolutely must create a common front so that these differences do not end up being exploited, which is no easy task.

Because many USW District 5 locals share the same employer (Rio Tinto), the Madagascar mine provides raw materials for the Rio Tinto processing plants in Quebec and Madagascar is a francophone country, there is a natural connection between the unions. When the Malagasy unions appealed for help to the USW, the Steelworkers Humanity Fund (SHF) responded. An SHF pilot project will give Anthony and Eugene, as well as many other local union activists, access to important resources for organizing to better defend their rights, and allow for the creation of a shared union office that will become a focal point of labour rights training and education.

In order to consolidate this relationship, a SHF delegation visited Madagascar in the summer of 2019. Denis Trottier, USW Area Coordinator in Brossard, Quebec, and Guy Gaudette, a union representative responsible for the steel sector in District 5 facilitated a workshop attended by about 30 activists affiliated with SVS and SEKRIMA. During these two days of exchanges and activities, participants recognized the crucial importance of communication and consensus among members. For their part, Guy and Denis were impressed by the resilience of their brothers and sisters in a context that makes union organizing difficult: “We’ve attained our objectives, even if we had to

make important adjustments to the training once we were there. But we learned a lot from the experience.”

One of the participants of the union training workshop



“WE’VE ATTAINED OUR OBJECTIVES, EVEN IF WE HAD TO MAKE IMPORTANT ADJUSTMENTS TO THE TRAINING ONCE WE WERE THERE. BUT WE LEARNED A LOT FROM THE EXPERIENCE.”

Denis Trottier facilitating the union training workshop



It can be easy to take for granted the standards and conditions that allow for the very existence of unions in Canada. A more level playing field is exactly what Eugene and Anthony want for Malagasy workers, and it is the change that the Steelworkers' Humanity Fund project aims to contribute to. For this reason, we hope that this is only the beginning of a long and fruitful inter-union solidarity relationship between Canadian and Malagasy activists.

Photos taken by Guillaume Charboneau

For more information on the Steelworkers Humanity Fund:

WWW.USW.CA/SHF

SVS and SEKRIMA activists at the end of the union training workshop



Steelworkers Humanity Fund
234 Eglinton Ave. E., Suite 800
Toronto, ON M4P 1K7

Phone: 416-487-1571
Fax: 416-487-9308
Email: humanityfund@usw.ca

UNITED STEELWORKERS
USW
MÉTALLOS