

Global Issues

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC): Insights from the Second World Congress

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Confederal international trade unionism has, in recent years, undertaken an in-depth reorganization of its structures and a review of its action strategies. Major changes over the last few years, led in particular by the implementation of strategies aimed at reinforcing trade union unity and the negotiating process at the global level, have affected the structuring and operating mode of the main international union organizations. This contribution is divided into two parts and examines some aspects of this transformation. First, we will describe briefly the role of confederal international trade unionism and its recent evolution in light of discussions which took place during the Second World Congress of the *International Trade Union Confederation* (ITUC) held in Vancouver from June 21-25, 2010. We will then discuss some of the main challenges that the ITUC will have to overcome if it is to play an important role in the future in regulating the global economy.

WHAT'S NEW WITH CONFEDERAL INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNIONISM?

The international trade union confederations, which include national trade union confederations from around the world, have always made it their duty to intervene with intergovernmental organizations such as the ILO, the OECD and the UN on issues relating to the recognition of union rights and the respect of international labour standards. To this end, from the 1970s onwards, the *International Confederation of Free Trade Unions* (ICFTU) pressed intergovernmental organizations to develop rules of conduct for multinational corporations. For example, the ICFTU was behind the first tripartite meeting in 1972 which led to the adoption by the ILO Governing Body in 1977 of the Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy.

During the 1980s, which were marked by a major economic crisis in the industrialized countries, the ICFTU focused on issues related to inequalities in global economic development. The main ICFTU campaigns during this period related to the debt burden and the increasing pauperization of countries in the South, rising interest rates, the harmful effects of trade and financial liberalization, and the policies of international financial institutions with regard to developing countries. The ICFTU's interventions with

international financial institutions intensified during this decade, in which the ICFTU obtained a permanent observer status at the annual meetings of the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). However, these interventions with international financial institutions yielded fewer results than those conducted during the previous decade with the ILO, the UN and the OECD. Nevertheless, they helped to make these organizations aware of the need for a social regulation of globalization.

In the early 1990s, the ICFTU collaborated with the International Trade Secretariats (ITSs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in an international campaign for the inclusion of a social clause in international trade agreements. This demand was included in the agenda of the World Trade Organization Conference held in Singapore in 1996. However, in the final declaration of the Conference, this demand was dismissed while the WTO's support of the ILO conventions was affirmed. The ICFTU's campaign continued during the WTO Ministerial Conference in Seattle in 1999, but differences of opinion appeared between union organizations in the North and those in the South concerning the negative impacts of "social protectionism" on emerging economies. The failure of the campaign for the social clause led the ICFTU to refocus its action on the ILO, whose tripartite governance structure gives a significant role to international union organizations. The ICFTU and the ITSs contributed in particular to the adoption in 1998 by the International Labour Conference of the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its follow up.

In 2006, the dissolution of the ICFTU and the *World Confederation of Labour* (WCL) and the creation at their initiative of the ITUC did not imply a radical change in the goals that had been pursued by confederal international trade unionism over the previous thirty years. However, the ITUC was immediately faced with particularly pertinent and pressing international issues, such as the world food crisis, the international financial collapse and the acceleration of climate change. This international situation thus contributed to a relative diversification of the ITUC's fields of action. The ITUC first maintained its activities involving political lobbying against major financial institutions by holding numerous meetings with heads of state and leaders of the governments of G8 and G20 countries. With the aim of constructing an 'alternative vision of a global economy which responds to the basic notions of social justice'¹ the ITUC urged these leaders to take into account the devastating effects of the financial crisis on workers and to set up more solid and more consistent regulatory and control frameworks worldwide. To support its demands, the ITUC also played a decisive role in the adoption by the ILO in 2009 of the Global Jobs Pact established to guide national and international policies aimed at stimulating economic recovery, creating jobs and providing greater social protection to workers.

Apart from these lobbying activities, the ITUC has also pursued its actions related to defending and promoting trade union rights, a fundamental *raison d'être* of the international trade union movement. Solidarity campaigns in support of unions which are in a precarious situation in a great number of countries, in particular Burma, Colombia, Guatemala, Guinea, Iran and Zimbabwe, have been central to the ITUC's action.² The seminal publication of this organization, the *Annual Survey of Trade Union Rights Violations*,

moreover serves as an international reference on these issues and contributes, each year, to attracting public and media attention to the situation and the extent of these violations around the world. Indeed, the 2010 edition of this survey reported 101 killings of trade unionists and 35 death threats against trade unionists between January 1 and December 31, 2009.

Although these major courses of action reproduced those already set out in the past by the organizations which preceded the ITUC, a new practice established by this organization has involved instigating international mobilizations around the ILO Decent Work Program. The inauguration of the 'World Day for Decent Work' held on October 7, 2008 and 2009, gave union activists the opportunity to join a vast international mobilization campaign focusing on the need to find alternatives to the excesses of globalization. Although this event, it must be conceded, is largely symbolic, it should nevertheless be recognized that this day lays the groundwork for the trade union movement to participate in joint action worldwide and is contributing to the movement to unite trade union forces.

Moreover, the ITUC has also launched a new top priority through its action on climate change. As shown by the new program discussed at its most recent World Congress, the fight against climate change has now become an integral part of its political agenda. In this sense, the ITUC is determined to play a more proactive role in order to support efforts made to ensure sustainable development. This stance furthermore marks an important change in the trade union movement with regard to the environment. Considered not so long ago as a minority concern easily ignored by union organizations, the climate change issue, it should be pointed out, subsequently became an object 'of the defensive skepticism that marked a reluctance even to endorse the 1997 Kyoto Protocol by unions'.³ However, the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in 2002 marked a breakthrough in thinking with its identification of the three pillars – economic, social, and environmental – of sustainable development. This definition brought out another way of viewing the social and employment policies supported by the ITUC and new environmental concerns. This perspective was moreover put forward in Copenhagen, where the ITUC, with the support of a large delegation of trade unionists, defended the idea 'of a just transition to a low carbon economy which would integrate the decent work agenda and the rights and interests of working people'.⁴

The main resolution adopted by the Second ITUC World Congress held in Vancouver in June 2010, which defines the ITUC's program of action for the next four years, identifies six priority intervention areas for Global Social Justice. The first three involve continuing actions undertaken since 2006 with regard to the promotion of decent work, the regulation of the economy and world finance, and sustainable development with low carbon emissions to fight against climate change. The other three policy priorities identified in the resolution are: labour market justice and equity, establishing a new model of economic development in which developed and developing countries will be able to benefit fairly from the fruits of social and economic progress, and promoting a new form of global governance to intergovernmental organizations in view of integrating a social dimension into neo-liberal economic globalization.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF THE RENEWAL OF INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNIONISM

Over the last two decades, international trade unionism has been evolving toward greater unity within the trade union movement worldwide. The creation of the ITUC in November 2006 effectively marked an important turning point in the history of trade unionism by putting an end to the international division that had persisted since the early twentieth century between, on the one hand, social-democratic and secular unionism, as represented by the ICFTU, and, on the other hand, Christian unionism, as embodied by the WCL.

We can, of course, welcome these efforts to unite, emphasizing that, at the confederation level, the international union movement can henceforth intervene in a more unified manner with major economic and financial organizations, while at the sectoral level, its actions can now be coordinated more effectively to ensure better protection of workers in countries that do not respect human and social rights, and in particular within multinational corporations. However, we can stay skeptical about the results of these organizational changes. In this respect, it should be recognized that the movement to unite union forces internationally has not in any way obliterated the importance of the issues and challenges currently faced by international union organizations.

One of these challenges no doubt involves effectively taking into account the North-South divide that has replaced the old East-West divide which prevailed during the Cold War and which was marked, at the union level, by an intense ideological and political struggle between the WTUF and the ICFTU. Despite repeated enthusiastic speeches given by leaders of international union organizations supporting the importance of building new forms of solidarity worldwide, the rise in social inequalities and the structural inequity in terms of global wealth distribution have not in any way lessened the disparity of interests between workers in the North and those in the South. Reconciling these interests is undoubtedly one of the main challenges faced by the structures of international trade unionism which, historically, have always been dominated by European union organizations'.⁵

Another important challenge faced by international trade unionism involves giving a concrete expression to the structural changes it has undergone. Faced with the numerous expectations raised in particular by the creation of the ITUC, some observers are concerned about the latter being transformed into an institutional machine, confined to denouncing neo-liberalism but unable to develop the concrete actions needed to regulate globalization. Putting the blame on the very limited budgets available to international union organizations⁶, these critics maintain that a real radical reform of the international union movement can only come about from the base and not, as is actually the case, as the result of a top-down process that is intrinsically bureaucratic and not directly connected with the social realities and union struggles taking place at the local level.

To add a shade of meaning, although it is fundamentally important for international union organizations to be able to stimulate actions that respond to the local concerns of

workers, it is nevertheless necessary to refrain from saddling them with the duty, on their own, to create actions of international scale and to provide an effective countervailing power to globalization. These organizations are at the junction of complex social and political interactions in which they are only one actor. Their role must thus be conceived in relation to other local, national and regional levels where union organizations have historically been rooted and, at times, endowed with substantial resources. In this sense, the mandate of international union organizations does not involve leading union action internationally on their own but rather ensuring the representation of a 'voice of labour' worldwide and fostering discussions and the implementation of strategies for action coordinated between organizations at the different levels. The recent development of new tools such as global union networks and International Framework Agreements (IFAs) moreover demonstrates, to a certain extent, the international union movement's capacity for innovation. To claim that the structural changes which have affected international union organizations are merely cosmetic is tantamount to disregarding the renewed dynamism of these organizations, in particular, pertaining to the regulation of multinational firms and the promotion of the ILO Decent Work Program.

NOTES

¹ITUC (2010a) *Now the People – From the Crisis to Global Justice*. Brussels: International Trade Union Confederation, p. 8.

²ITUC (2010b) *Activity Report*. Brussels: International Trade Union Confederation.

³ITUC (2010a) *Now the People – From the Crisis to Global Justice*. Brussels: International Trade Union Confederation, p. 12.

⁴ITUC (2010a) *Now the People – From the Crisis to Global Justice*. Brussels: International Trade Union Confederation, p. 12.

⁵The latest ITUC financial report eloquently attests to this 'eurocentrism' of international trade unionism since of all union dues received by this organization in 2009, more than 61.5% came from its affiliates in Western Europe.

⁶As an example, the ITUC's budget, which has been relatively stable for many years, is some 11 million euros yearly, a very large part of which comes from the union dues of its affiliated trade unions.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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