

The second conference\* of trade union centres in the Indian Ocean region raised some very important questions for labour internationalism in the 1990s – and even into the 21st century. KARL VON HOLDT was there.

# *a new labour* **internationalism?**

**W**hat are the possibilities of South-South labour solidarity? What are the limits to labour internationalism? And lurking within these questions – though never explicitly debated at the conference – what role is the ICFTU currently playing in developing labour internationalism? What role could it play? Is a new and more vigorous labour internationalism possible without the ICFTU and its resources? These are some of the questions raised by the conference debates.

## **Common themes**

The conference brought together an incredibly wide range of union experiences (see box). Despite the diversity, several common themes emerged. Firstly, many of the trade union movements are involved in a struggle for democracy – the Koreans, the Thai, the Indonesians. Progressive unionists from these countries face severe repression. Over the past four years 2 500 unionists in South Korea have been detained. Twenty-one of the KTUC's 25 executive members have spent a period in jail – nine of them twice! In Indonesia, the official trade unions are controlled by the military regime, and all other labour activity is banned and brutally repressed.

The second theme was the struggle for trade union rights. While unionists in Indonesia,

Thailand and Korea are struggling for basic union rights, unions in India, Sri Lanka and Australia are fighting to preserve the rights they already have from attack by the state. In many countries in the region, workers in huge plants in free trade zones or export-processing zones have no rights at all. Women workers from such zones in Malaysia and Indonesia told us harrowing tales of the conditions they face. Women workers are often the worst exploited.

The third theme is the struggle for economic development. Unionists from SA, Australia, India and Zimbabwe spoke about the threat to domestic industry as tariff barriers come down and their economies are opened to international competition. Investment is booming in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand - but wages are low, there is limited or no democracy, and trade unions are weak or repressed. Korean capitalism appears to be facing an accumulation crisis as militant unionism takes root and wages rise. The KTUC delegate told us 100 000 jobs were lost in one year in the footwear industry when factories moved to Indonesia and Bangladesh. Vietnam is struggling to make the transition from command economy to market economy, and the unions fear the burden will be borne by the

---

\* In Australia in November 1992. The first conference was reported in SA LABOUR BULLETIN Vol 16 No 5



workers. In India, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank have dictated policies of financial deregulation, privatisation and low wages.

The fourth theme that emerged is the extent to which progressive trade union movements in the region are seeking to build broad popular alliances in a struggle for democracy and people-centred economic policies. In India, for example, CITU is actively involved in building an alliance of trade unions, community organisations, unemployed youth and students in a "patriotic" struggle against the economic policies of the government, the IMF and the World Bank. "Our national agenda is the protection of our economic sovereignty and self-reliance. We need to expand the domestic market, which means forging links with the peasantry. We are combating closures and unemployment," said Tapan Sen. CITU delegates had come straight from a massive demonstration of one million in Calcutta!

In South Korea, the KTUC has a policy of "developing and strengthening the people's movement", Eun-Cheol Shin told the conference. "We already have a national alliance for democracy including labour, the student movement, intellectuals and farmers." The Thai unionists were also closely involved in the popular movement and street protests last year that forced democratic concessions from the authoritarian state. The labour movements in Philippines and SA have a long history of engaging in the broader national democratic struggle.

### Undermining economic sovereignty

The conference also heard expert analysis of new trends in the global economy:\*



*Australian unions demonstrate against the withdrawal of labour rights in Victoria*

*Photo: Nicola Taylor*

- ☐ World finance markets have become increasingly deregulated. It has become much more difficult for governments to control or influence the movement of finance and capital in and out of their countries.
- ☐ There has been a world-wide trend to reduce government economic regulation or intervention. This often means removing labour rights, removing state controls on investment, deregulating labour, capital and land markets, cutting public expenditure, devaluation, privatisation, etc. The World Bank has been very influential in this trend.
- ☐ There has been the rise of the global corporation which integrates production in a number of different countries. For example, an auto company may manufacture engines in one country, springs in another, body panels somewhere else, and assemble them all in a fourth country. Some 50% of world trade is now conducted, not between different countries, but between different branches of the same company. The same kind of thing happens at a financial level – Ford is believed to move half a billion dollars a day between different countries.
- ☐ The market has become increasingly competitive world wide, and corporations are forced to increase their capacity to

\* Howard Guille, 'Trends in the Global Economy and Implications for trade union strategy'; Craig Littler, 'Global politics and the new managerialism'



respond to a range of market demands, to innovate and develop new products, to cut costs, to develop flexible production and fast response times.

- There is a trend towards a new managerial strategy, which seeks a more highly skilled and committed workforce and seeks to marginalise and exclude trade unions.

Economist Howard Guille pointed out that all of these changes undermine the economic sovereignty of the nation-state by reducing government's capacity to intervene in any aspect of the economy. Indeed, governments are forced into competition with each other to provide the most attractive conditions for global corporations to invest. This is exactly what is happening in the Indian Ocean region.

This undermining of the economic sovereignty of governments also weakens the power of the labour movement, since trade

market lies in unions moving into politics and government. We have got to contest ideas with national elites and intellectuals." He pointed out that there are ways to challenge and influence international agencies. For example, the World Bank is constitutionally required to convene an Advisory Council which includes among other things labour representation. The Advisory Council has only met once, and none of the social democratic governments who are members of the Bank has ever asked for it to be reconvened.

### Resolutions

After much discussion, the conference resolved:

- To implement an exchange programme of workers and organisers in the region, in order to encourage the development of strong independent unions in countries that have

relatively weak union movements. In this way organisations could share their experiences and challenges.

- To encourage each respective national organisation to adopt the Social Code of Conduct approved by the conference. This Code sets out the basic trade union rights of access, recognition, and other organising rights, as well as a range of worker rights (eg freedom from racial or

### Trade union centres represented at the Second Indian Ocean Rim Conference, December 1992

**Australia** – Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU)

**India** – Centre of Indian Trade unions (CITU)

**Korea** – Korea Trade Union Congress (KTUC)

**Pakistan** – Muttahida Labour Federation

**Philippines** – Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU)

**South Africa** – Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)

**Sri Lanka** – Industrial Transport and General Workers Union

**Vietnam** – Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (TLD)

**Zimbabwe** – Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) and Public Services Association

Unionists from **Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia** also attended.

unions have often relied on sympathetic governments to implement policies that encourage investment, provide jobs, regulate the labour market and establish labour rights. Now, wherever the labour movement is too strong or the government imposes too many restrictions, capital simply moves elsewhere.

Guille did, however, conclude that the new trends in the global economy open up some new possibilities for union action such as targeting global transport and communication links.

He also argued that "the control of the

gender discrimination). It also calls for carefully targeted boycott campaigns on export companies which fail to comply with the standards set out in the Code.

- To publish a newsletter twice a year.
- That women in the participating organisations establish a regional network. There was a strong gender caucus in the conference (see page 88).
- To establish a co-ordinating committee to monitor and implement the above resolutions, to undertake research with a



view to establishing alternative economic and political strategies, to consider campaigns against free market restructuring and political repression, and to convene another conference in 1994.

The conference thus made an important start in developing labour solidarity in the region. Comrades from different countries got to know each other, and discovered many similar problems as well as many different ones. Some practical possibilities for developing solidarity and mutual assistance were identified. Everything now depends on whether these are implemented.

### Difficult questions

There are difficult questions that will have to be confronted by the unions in the region if an effective labour internationalism is to develop.

Firstly, the emphasis of the decisions taken at the conference is on strengthening the weaker trade union movements in each country. Certainly, strengthening labour in each country, and forging practical links between them, can only strengthen the capacity of labour to resist capital worldwide. But the analyses presented to the conference showed that capital is immensely powerful in each country because of its mobility at an international level. This mobility means that it can compel the government – and the workers – of each country to compete with the governments and workers of all other countries. Unless labour can develop a proactive strategy to challenge capital at this level, it will always find itself responding on a terrain defined by capital. Such a proactive strategy would mean campaigning to place regulation on the international agenda – which means, as Guille noted, “moving into politics and government.”

The scale of such a campaign may seem daunting, but without it labour internationalism will remain limited and weak. It may be possible to start with existing struggles that could be extended and linked. For example, progressive trade unions in India, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe are currently trying to mobilise against economic policies imposed by the World Bank and the IMF. In SA and Australia COSATU and ACTU are mobilising around their

own economic proposals, in opposition to policies similar to those of the IMF and the Bank. Surely those struggles could be linked, however modestly? Each of these labour movements celebrates May Day, and they could exchange speakers. A list of common demands could be drawn up around the theme of restoring economic sovereignty. A joint delegation could put their position to the Bank and the IMF, and they could try to win the support of sympathetic governments for convening an Advice Council. At the same time, they could campaign for support for these ideas among political parties, movements and intellectuals in their own countries.

This introduces a second question. Do the progressive labour movements of the South have sufficient resources and capacity to really develop an effective South-South solidarity against the immense power of capital? Or do they need the financial, institutional and technical resources that only the unions of the North can provide – which means utilising the ICFTU? For example, some of the International Trade Secretariats associated with the ICFTU provide effective solidarity and support and have the capacity to challenge corporate power through world company shop steward councils (for example in the auto industry). It is significant, too, that the Indian Ocean Regional Conference was only made possible through funding organised by ACTU – an ICFTU affiliate, and indeed the only ICFTU affiliate which attended!

It may be argued that the ICFTU provides financial support to some extremely nasty organisations in the region – such as the militarised ‘official’ unions in Indonesia (associated with the military dictatorship and brutal repression of progressive unionists), or the FKTU in Korea. But it may be possible to use the Social Code to campaign within the ICFTU for the expulsion of such reactionary bodies, and for the implementation of progressive policies in the region.

These are controversial questions, but they will have to be debated and tested by progressive trade unionists in the militant organisations of the South, if a new and effective labour internationalism is to emerge. ☆



# WORKERS'

# WORLD

A magazine of international labour and politics

Issue No 9,  
Summer 1993,  
focuses on

**BUILDING**



**WORKER**

**INTERNATIONALISM**

**TODAY!**

Giving life to international trade unions  
Building solidarity with militant unions

Order your copy now from:  
ILRIG 14 Community House  
Salt River Road Salt River  
or P O Box 213 Salt River 7924  
Tel: (021) 476375

**ILRIG**

Price R2.50 (cheques and postal orders payable to ILRIG)

Part-time sellers! Contact us to find out about selling the magazine on commission.

## SPEAK MAGAZINE

### *Putting women first*

**Read about** what women are doing to change the inferior position imposed on them by society in male-dominated South Africa.


**SPEAK** is committed to promoting a positive image of women which challenges the negative image often presented by the mass media.

You can buy **SPEAK** magazine at CNA outlets and news-stands, and at some bookshops and supermarkets in South Africa and neighbouring countries.

**Subscription rates for 12 issues are:**

Individuals	R24.00
Organisations	R80.00
Institutions	R80.00

**For more information, contact us at:**  
P O Box 261363 Excom 2023  
17th Floor Conlyn House,  
156 President St Johannesburg  
Tel: (011) 296166



## Labour - Management Publications

### A Guide To The Industrial Laws of South Africa

---

Unemployment Insurance Act

Wage Act

Manpower Training Act

Rules of the Industrial Court

Rules of the Labour Appeal Court

Arbitration Act

Labour Relations Act

Basic Conditions of Employment Act

Basic Conditions of Employment for Farmworkers

Machinery and Occupational Safety Act

Workmen's Compensation Act

---

**PRICE: R140 + VAT (R19.60) + POSTAGE (10.00) = R169.60**

Written with the layperson in mind, this compilation of relevant labour relations legislation is ideal for all trade unionists, shopstewards, workers, personnel practitioners and general management.

Name:

Position:

Organisation:

Postal Address:

Code:

Telephone:

To order your copy, send a postal order or cheque, or use your credit card, with the following details:

Credit Card ☐ Visa ☐ Mastercard ☐

Signature

Expiry Date

**MIKE MILES**

Labour-Management Advisor Industrial Relations Training and Conflict Resolution  
P O Box 912 Randpark Ridge 2156 Tel: (011) 678 1793/4765626 Fax: (011) 476 6038