

Com.Com

a series of irreverent postcards

POSTCARD 1

Dear Com,

I took a bundle of postcards to the post office for a group of conference delegates who were afraid to walk out into the streets of Durban alone.

Hardly surprising. They had all been told by their delegation leader that they would almost certainly be mugged, robbed and possibly murdered because they all looked liked 'strangers'. Funny, I thought they all looked like pink-skinned car dealers from Benoni.

Anyway, I know it's bad manners, but I couldn't resist reading the cards, hoping for insights into how the outside world now sees our transformation, and perhaps more importantly, how they relay it back home. Hey Com, every single card mentioned the same thing. The weather! It rained nearly all week when the ICFTU came to town.

*Yours,
Com.com*

POSTCARD NO 2

Dear Com,

Imagine, I am attending the ICFTU congress in Durban. My how times have changed! It doesn't seem that long ago when South African union leaders were adamantly castigating the ICFTU as a tool of international capital and imperialism.

When copies of 'Where Were You

Our Inside Reporter sends a series of postcards from Durban at the time of the ICFTU Congress.

Brother' were being passed around like samizdat conclusively proving that the organisation was little more than a front for the British Foreign Office and its American counterpart. Now it is enthusiastically hosted by all three Federations. Makes you think. Who exactly has changed? I must say, I sort of miss the cold war. At least there were vaguely good and bad guys. The class warriors versus the class collaborators, those waging class struggle and those engaging in class co-option. Now there is just a sort of global paralysis, well almost, heard today that Brother Bill Jordan, re-elected general secretary of the ICFTU, has accepted a title and is to become a Member of the House of Lords. 'Lord Bill of Accomodationism' sounds pretty cute to me.

*Yours,
Com.com*

POSTCARD NO 3

Dear Com,

Can you believe the theme of this conference? 'Globalising Social Justice.' Not



only are we supposed to embrace capitalism, but we have to use its language too. I ask myself, whatever happened to Building International Workers Solidarity? This little linguistic spin reveals plenty. We must add a social dimension to capitalism yes, but reject capitalism? No way says the likes of Com Lord Bill.

Here we have nearly two thousand delegates and visitors. A mass of interesting and crucial experience, and the potential to mobilise millions of workers across the globe, and what are they being asked to do? Globalise social justice. And how is this to be done? By demanding, (in the strongest possible terms of course), the right to be consulted, to have a seat at the table, to secure representation in the corridors of power. To be allowed to enter into 'partnerships' across the class divide.

In other words, to go cap in hand to the world's bosses and persuade them through the force of rational argument that the participation of the trade union movement in helping to manage globalisation will

produce a 'win-win' situation. And we are told, there are encouraging signs. Some representatives of the World Bank and IMF and even a few 'far-sighted' world leaders, see the advantages of having 'the trade union leadership inside the tent pissing out, instead of the other way round'. I bet they do! At a time when the IMF and World Bank are just about at their most discredited, the world trade union leadership wants to provide them with a human face!

What strikes you is the absence of an alternative to the devastating impact of neo-liberal economic policies. It's all about ameliorating the worst aspects, and of trying to appear reasonable. Surely, we can be more imaginative than this. We have the best brains in the world on our side. We know every industry inside out, we also know more than anyone else what our people, our class needs, to live a decent life, and we know all about the chronic waste of arms sales and privatisation, and demutualisation, and casualisation and super-exploitation. We also know that

despite the much trumpeted power of capital, it's a shaky world out there, and that if we got our act together, and used our mobilising power instead of neutralising it through 'partnerships' with capital, we could at the very least, open up some space for a pro-worker agenda.

Sorry Com. I am in a rage. Will write again when I have cooled off. By the way, it's still raining.

*Yours,
Com.com*

POSTCARD NO 4

Dear Com,
Help! The ICFTU Congress almost turned into a trade union event today. There was a women's march, with militant slogans, damn good speakers in the main. It was wildly internationalist and full of energy. Even the Resolutions Sub-Committee stopped work to see what all the fuss was about!

Some of the 'grey-suits' even joined in, and as one comic com remarked, took part in a demonstration for the first time in decades, even if it was scheduled as part of the conference programme. Most of the women attending the conference must have been sick and tired of hearing gender this and gender that, from much the same old grey suits steering the ship as before. Time to throw a few people overboard I would say!

It stopped raining for almost all of the time of the demonstration. Someone up there is in favour of equality Com!

*Yours,
Com.com*

POSTCARD NO 5

Dear Com,
I have reached saturation point. If I have to sit through another, interminable day of

over long, and mostly predictable speeches from the platform I am likely to go insane. Some comrades took the stage to tell us, a trade union audience that had trekked half way round the world, that trade unions are a good thing! Well thanks for that com! Good to hear, but not 17 times in one afternoon! It's a shame that we have to plough through so much sludge to find a few gems, and there are a few in case you think I am getting too negative in my late militancy! Ironically, given the role of the ICFTU in the cold war, this gathering reminds me of the worst events organised by the Glorious Stalinist School of Conference Arrangements Committees. You remember them Com? Where the approved resolutions and the minutes were written up before the damn conferences even took place!

Generally the conference consists of a procession of speakers, who give a prepared speech, have it entered in the record, presumably to be immortalised in some way, and then sit down to the rapturous applause of their own delegations, and the polite shuffling of everyone else. While all this is going on, a couple of committees sit and go through the paperwork, and come up with consensus documents which are then approved by the conference. There might be a little action in the Resolutions Committee from time to time, but not much believe me. There are exceptions of course. A young woman from Canada, with a pierced ear or was it lip, and yet looked far more normal than the men in grey suits, raised an un-pierced eyebrow or two by having the audacity to suggest that the old guard should make way for a younger, more militant cadre. I hope she sticks around.

Now once upon a time, COSATU coms would have been up on that platform

saying something like 'Comrades, we think this conference lacks spirit, and appropriate levels of participation. We think this is a reflection of the lack of workers control in the organisation, and we think it should be addressed.'

But it made me think Com. Maybe I should send a postcard to Bill and the others. Next time, build in three-hour lunch breaks so that comrades can mix and interact, that's what they want anyway. Concentrate on the real struggles that are taking place, and get those actually in struggle to speak more, to share their organising successes, and surface the problems they face which the international trade union movement could tackle. Use the time in between conferences to encourage discussion in national centres, get motions in that are focused on specifics, don't mirror the anodyne compositing of the ILO! Finally, use workers' culture to complement the debates, and add a creative and integrated dimension to the programme. In short, let's get people talking, exchanging ideas, inspired, and building solidarity relationships as part of the conference programme, not despite it!

*Yours,
Com.com*

POSTCARD NO 6

Dear Com,

This conference is full of ironies. Today I sat through a debate on the evils of privatisation, and its impact on workers' living standards. There were some powerful examples, and I was thinking, we could do with a really good case study to capture these points. A case study which showed how the profiteers use their political leverage to strike deals, and how the absence of any alternative gives space for seemingly 'get-rich-quick' solutions to be taken up.

Went outside for a cup of coffee and talked to a worker in one of the rather handsome café areas in the Durban International Conference Centre. I asked her, 'Are you unionised?' She answered, 'Not now. Not since this place was bought out and we had to reapply for our jobs on a contract basis. Now we keep quiet about the union or else we don't get offered the work.'

Asked a few friends about the Conference Centre, and uncover a riveting story. It was built as part of a plan to regenerate the City of Durban, and to offer the highest standards of conference facilities on the continent. And I think it's quite beautiful architecturally.

The provincial and national government put up a large part of the money, and things were moving ahead nicely. There are dozens of conferences on the agenda for Durban, some global. Then, along comes a slick consultant or two, to advise, under pain of losing the confidence of the wider business community, that the Conference Centre should no longer be a civic concern, that it should be sold off, and the proceeds employed elsewhere. Up jumps a well connected property tycoon, from South East Asia, and before you know where we are, the Conference Centre has been sold off at a fraction of what it cost, and 'saved' from municipal management. Local and national taxpayers who paid for it get virtually no return, the province loses what could have been a major earner, and the workers lose any form of job security. Meanwhile, the ICFTU Conference meets inside this monument to GIFM (grossly irresponsible financial management), and can't see the case study for the false palm trees. Hey Com, shouldn't someone have asked if the place was organised?

*Yours,
Com.com*

POSTCARD NO 7

Dear Com,

The good thing about conferences is that you can get to read all the things that passed you by and so took out my copy of the last but one *Labour Bulletin* on Internationalism and read it. Enjoyed it too. Made me think about worker to worker solidarity all over again, and about how very vital it is.

This conference has been obsessed with partnerships, especially those between the private and the public sectors, or as one creative hack put it, between the commercial and the concerned. Some trade union leaders are clearly prepared to do anything to get under the balance sheets with the bosses! And nothing must get in the way of cementing these 'strategic relationships' and that especially includes industrial action. The cardinal sin now, trotted out like a *neo-liberal mantra* by government, is that foreign investors must not, repeat must not, be given any reason for withholding their precious investments. In fact, the advocates of 'partnership' in the world trade union movement use this argument to win favour with the rich and powerful, saying, we can give you 'stability', if only you will let us in to the hallowed chambers. Give us partnership and we will deliver the labour movement on a plate! By the way, someone mentioned 'Socialism' today and nearly caused a mass heart attack. Made me think. What we need is public-public partnerships!

Yours,
Com.com

POST CARD NO 8

Dear Com,

Sorry I have been a bit negative. It's the last day of the conference and people are going home early. Who can blame them. But I met a number of really inspiring

comrades. I know that a huge number of union leaders are under pressure at the moment, but some have been simply heroic. The Nigerians are here in force, and looking magnificent in their beautiful flowing gowns, but they are a tough lot. The president of the four million strong Nigeria Labour Congress is as sharp as a razor, and has an infectious sense of humour. It's good that they have made a *real connection* with COSATU, and are talking about real solidarity activities. They will play a key role in the transformation of Africa's most populous nation that's for sure.

The Sierra Leone Labour Congress is here. The general secretary should have been given two hours of the conference to explain how the SLLC was able to sustain a total general strike for nine months in order to get rid of the last military government, and to usher in the elected civilian government. Recent events there have again shown how the labour movement is at the centre of the fight for democratic rights. There are not many so-called advanced trade union movements in the North who could maintain such a heroic struggle. You would think someone would want to hear how they did it, against all the odds?

Then there were the representatives from Zimbabwe, Burma, Brazil, India, Malaysia, and so many other places where workers have taken a lead and won significant gains. It's been a bit hard on the backside getting through this conference, and sometimes I have been driven to paroxysms of boredom, but despite all that, there is vitality in our movement globally, despite the best efforts of the rich and powerful to derail it, and incorporate it. The struggle is to make sure we have an international we deserve, and not one we inherit by default.

It's stopped raining, Durban looks wonderful.

Yours in mischievous solidarity,
Com.Com