

# International Trade Union Confederation

## Face of the North

Recently Cosatu and StreetNet attended the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) World Congress but they were left feeling cheated. **Katherine Joynt** and **Mariane Tsoeu** report on why they felt this was a meeting that subtly or overtly reflected the interests of unions of the North.

**T**he International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) World Congress took place in July this year, leaving a trail of controversy. According to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), the conference was disappointingly watered down and simply mirrored other global economic conferences and summits such as the G20 which reinforce the status quo between developed and developing countries. Cosatu and StreetNet, who also attended the conference, gave their impressions of the conference.

### STRUCTURE OF CONFERENCE

ITUC was launched in 2006 after the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the World Confederation of Labour (WCL) dissolved. ITUC is comprised of 312 affiliated members representing a total of 176 million workers in 156 countries. The organisation holds a global annual conference attended by affiliated members and invited guests to discuss issues that concern workers and their representatives.

The second World Congress of ITUC took place in June 2010 in Vancouver, Canada.

The conference structure is similar to most conferences. Member organisations discuss resolutions at preparatory regional

meetings such as in ITUC-Africa, after which amendments to the resolutions are tabled at a General Council meeting. This is followed by a Plenary where about 65 delegates hold discussions on the tabled amendments.

Finally, at the World Congress, amendments are either adopted or rejected. The conference, agenda and final resolutions are decided on beforehand which means that there are no surprises. Indeed, as Bongani Masuku, Cosatu's international relations secretary, points out, 'Those who set the agenda already know the final outcomes', which raises a number of controversial issues.

There are three main challenges presented by the ITUC conference that Cosatu felt were of concern. These are that issues of the South are sidelined, that ITUC is too restricted, and that class and historical issues as root causes are ignored.

### NEGLECT OF SOUTH ISSUES

The balance of power in the international trade union movement originally developed during a period of industrial North dominance. This balance of power is reflected in the ITUC World Congress where unions from developing countries in the 'South' and unions from developed

countries in the 'North' gather.

Although there is a consciousness about creating a balance between unions from all ITUC regions, Cosatu reports that the agenda of countries from the developed North is asserted above the interests of countries from the South.

Apart from the history of the international trade union movement, the dominance of the 'North' is linked to a number of other issues. This includes funding which comes from wealthier countries and the strength of the unions in the North where there is more formal unemployment than in the South where unions have fewer members owing to the larger number of informal economy workers.

The conference agenda and resolution decisions are controlled by the 'Big 4': the United States' American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organisation (AFL-CIO), Germany's Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB), the British Trade of Union Congress (British TUC) and the Japan Trade Union Confederation (JTUC-Rengo).

According to Masuku, 'The Big 4 determine the direction of ITUC and offer no apologies about it, although they are subtle about how they do it. ITUC is unable to be an effective voice to the countries of the South. It is a great show in the

sense of bringing together trade unions, but with no tangible results for the South, especially Africa.'

For Cosatu, the problem of power relations in ITUC runs even deeper as it links to the position of workers in the North in the global capitalist system. According to Masuku, unions in the North feel they have a 'duty to uphold and reaffirm the class roots of the global capitalist system because they are the beneficiaries in the system'.

The issue of organising workers in the informal economy also illustrates how the agenda of the

the informal economy in ITUC. However, when two organisations, namely Self-Employed Women's Association (Sewa) and Ghana ITUC, with the support of the Nigeria Labour Congress, Croc Mexico and General Federation of Nepalese Trade Union (Gefont) from the South tabled a resolution for the establishment of a department to focus on informal economy workers, there was collective resistance from leadership.

Horn points out that instead, ITUC leaders opted to 'pepper clauses of other resolutions with

'class', 'race', 'capitalism' and 'global power relations' are part of the daily vocabulary of Cosatu leaders and many other unions of the South. Surprisingly, these terms are not allowed at the ITUC World Congress because they are considered to be 'extreme language' which is 'not in line with ITUC's language and traditions'.

Although Cosatu proposed several amendments for the ITUC Plenary, their amendments were not well received and some were not opened for discussion. Indeed at the Plenary, the amendments that Cosatu raised were considered by ITUC leadership as too 'radical and ideological'. Therefore, instead of being included in the final draft at the Plenary after the General Council meeting in Brussels, Cosatu's inputs were included in the pack for the ITUC conference as 'stand alone'.

On the resolution on the global economic recession, the issue of gender, which is recognised by ITUC, was prevalent. However, Cosatu's amendment to the resolution 'women from the global South are the worst victims of this unjust global system' was rejected. The Big 4 argued that all women around the world are suffering equally from the effects of the global economic recession and there should be no division between women from the North and those from the South.

What this points to is that the conference is neutralised and restricted. Indeed, on issues such as the Middle East conflict which is discussed below, even the United Nations General Assembly was more controversial and outspoken.

## CLASS AND HISTORY

For Cosatu, one of the most frustrating aspects of the

North is asserted above that of the South. As Pat Horn from StreetNet indicated, 'Unions of the South raising the issues of developing countries such as the informal economy, often experience resistance when these issues appear to threaten the balance of power in the North'. StreetNet, which organises workers in the informal economy such as street vendors, was invited to the ITUC World Congress as a guest.

That StreetNet was invited is an indicator that there is a level of acceptance of organising workers in

mention of informal economy organising.'

However, Horn believes that as 'more and more workers in the informal economy are organising and taking up leadership positions in the trade union movement', discussion about organising these workers and addressing their struggles will spontaneously become more mainstream in future conferences.

## ITUC IS RESTRICTED

Coming from a history of race and class oppression, words such as

Labour Upront



*The second World ITUC Congress in Vancouver brought into question how relevant ITUC is as a voice for unions of the South. (L-R Sharon Burrow ITUC president, Guy Ryder general secretary and Ken Georgetti president of the Canadian Labour Congress.)*

conference was that the Big 4 and many other unions from the North were in denial about the history of global power relations and underlying issues of class.

As Masuku stated, 'There is an entrenched agenda designed and sustained by the Big 4 which is about protecting an unequal, unjust global economic system. They only want to deal with the effects and manifestations but not the root causes of the problem.' The rejection of Cosatu's amendments to the resolutions on climate change, sustainable development and Palestine/Israel demonstrate this denial.

On the issue of climate change, Cosatu wished to add that although the causes of climate change are 'mostly the responsibility of developed countries... developing countries are adopting the same predatory economic growth patterns of the developed countries'. The amendment was rejected because unions from the North said that climate change is the responsibility of all countries and not only developed countries.

Similarly, on the issue of sustainable development, Cosatu's amendments were rejected. The resolution originally argued that Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) and corrupt African elites who are not adding value are plundering natural resources in developing countries.

Cosatu wanted to add that Western governments who bribe African elites and support these MNCs are also responsible for the plundering of natural resources in developing countries. Other than the French, the rest of the Plenary rejected Cosatu's amendment, leaving it only at MNCs and African elite. This despite proof that the German government sold arms to the Tanzanian government and that

MNCs are often owned by Western governments. As Masuku noted, 'They only want to look at the one side of it but we have to look at both sides of the relationship'.

For Cosatu, the most controversial resolution was the issue of Palestine/Israel. Cosatu felt that the resolution was inaccurate because it situated Israel as the coloniser, and Palestine as the colonised, in the same position with equal condemnation of violence.

Cosatu proposed that ITUC should 'support the just struggles of the Palestinian people and call for an immediate end to occupation by Israel, as well as confirm that Israel is an apartheid state.' Cosatu included additional clauses that supported the Goldstone report on Israel as adopted by the UN General Assembly which found that Israel had committed war crimes; called for the prosecution of all war criminals involved in the Gaza war; advocated the support of the Global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Campaign; and support for the convening of a Global Conference for Solidarity with the people of Palestine.

As Masuku stated, 'One can condemn the violence and condemn Israel but one must also understand that while there are casualties, Hamas is fighting for its liberation. The source of the violence is the occupation; this is the root of the problem. The colonised are fighting against the coloniser.'

Just before the Plenary, the deputy general secretary of ITUC, Mamounata Cisse wanted to see Cosatu urgently about the Palestinian resolution. She warned Cosatu that it was not advisable to discuss this issue so they should withdraw the amendments to the resolution on Palestine before the Plenary. Cosatu was also approached

by an Arab union from Africa speaking on behalf of the Arab bloc who told them to withdraw the amendments to the resolution.

Yet despite these bullying tactics, Cosatu voiced its concerns about the resolution at the Plenary and was later approached by other unions commending them for raising this issue.

Although the Palestine issue is not taken very seriously in ITUC, workers in many developing countries are in solidarity with the people of Palestine, as demonstrated by dock workers in India, California, Sri Lanka and Sweden who refused to offload cargo from Israeli ships. It is unclear why unions from these countries were not as vocal as Cosatu on Palestine but it could tie into national politics or bullying tactics.

Cosatu was disappointed that throughout the conference ITUC addressed problems artificially instead of looking at the root causes of these problems.

## CONCLUSION

One would expect ITUC, as a global confederation of trade unions, to be progressive and non-biased. However, it seems that many unions from the North are shaping the conference agenda and the final resolutions to support their global positioning. Primary issues facing unions and organisations in developing countries involve race, class and organising workers in the informal economy. Yet it is these issues that were sidelined at the ITUC World Congress. This brings into question how effective and relevant ITUC is as a platform to voice the concerns and struggles of unions and organisations from the South. <sup>LB</sup>

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