

# Reflections on Sigtur

## *successes and challenges*

About 120 delegates from 10 countries attended the Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (Sigtur) conference in Johannesburg on 25 to 29 October. The conference was hosted by COSATU and was the fifth regional conference of what was formerly known as the Indian Ocean Initiative. Previous meetings have taken place in Australia and Calcutta, India.

Sigtur brings together independent unions and labour-related NGOs who share an identity based upon resisting the exploitation created by neo-liberal policies. Sigtur drew people from countries outside of North America, Europe and Japan. In practice, this involved unionists and labour NGOs from Australia, India, Indonesia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, South Africa and South Korea. Observers from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Canada also attended. The Johannesburg meeting focused on practical strategies that unions could take to combat neo-liberal globalisation. Discussions in small groups and larger sessions focused upon four main issues:

- developing global unionism;
- a corporate campaign against Rio Tinto;
- working towards a common May Day;
- rebuilding the union base.

### **Global unionism**

Conference organisers asked the delegates to consider whether some kind of global

*Robert O'Brien identifies the challenges facing labour and outlines the discussions that took place at Sigtur.*

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unionism could be developed in response to the increasing globalisation of capitalism. Delegates were unsure as to what increased internationalism might look like or whether it was possible to move much beyond ties between national unions. However, one practical example of this renewed commitment to internationalism was a statement of intent signed by the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU), Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). The MUA had supported the anti-apartheid struggle by boycotting South African ships and goods. South African workers had supported the MUA in 1995, 1997 and 1998 through a series of protests and boycotts of Australian ships because of the anti-union drive against Australian unions. The statement of intent committed the unions to explore the possibility of linking the ports of Fremantle in Western Australia and Durban in South Africa.

The Sigtur initiative itself is an example of one attempt to build a new form of unionism in a global era. It is meant to

complement existing international union structures such as the International Trade Secretariats (ITSS), by bringing together trade unions and activists on an informal basis. Sigtur pays a co-ordinating role by establishing contacts between activists, supplying information and organising initiatives among its members.

Delegates at the conference then take this information back to their own organisations and consider whether they can take concrete action to bolster international co-operation. In form and function Sigtur, resembles a network of groups rather than a hierarchical organisation. Its growth has been facilitated by the breakdown of ideological divisions following the end of the Cold War and by the ease of communication brought on by the information technology revolution. It is a good example of what Peter Waterman has called a communications internationalism.

Waterman has suggested that new forms of communication allow labour groups to establish networks of activists and union members on an informal basis. These networks can be created cheaply, dismantled and rebuilt according to a particular issue, cause or need. Such networks can bring rank and file unionists directly into internationalist activity. This opens the possibility for an energised mass of labour activists operating on a network basis. These networks pressure traditional representative forms of organisation (such as the ITSS or the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) to become more active in combating neo-liberal globalisation.

### **Rio Tinto corporate campaign**

One of Sigtur's goals was to raise the issue of a corporate campaign against the multinational mining giant Rio Tinto. Rio Tinto is the world's largest private mining

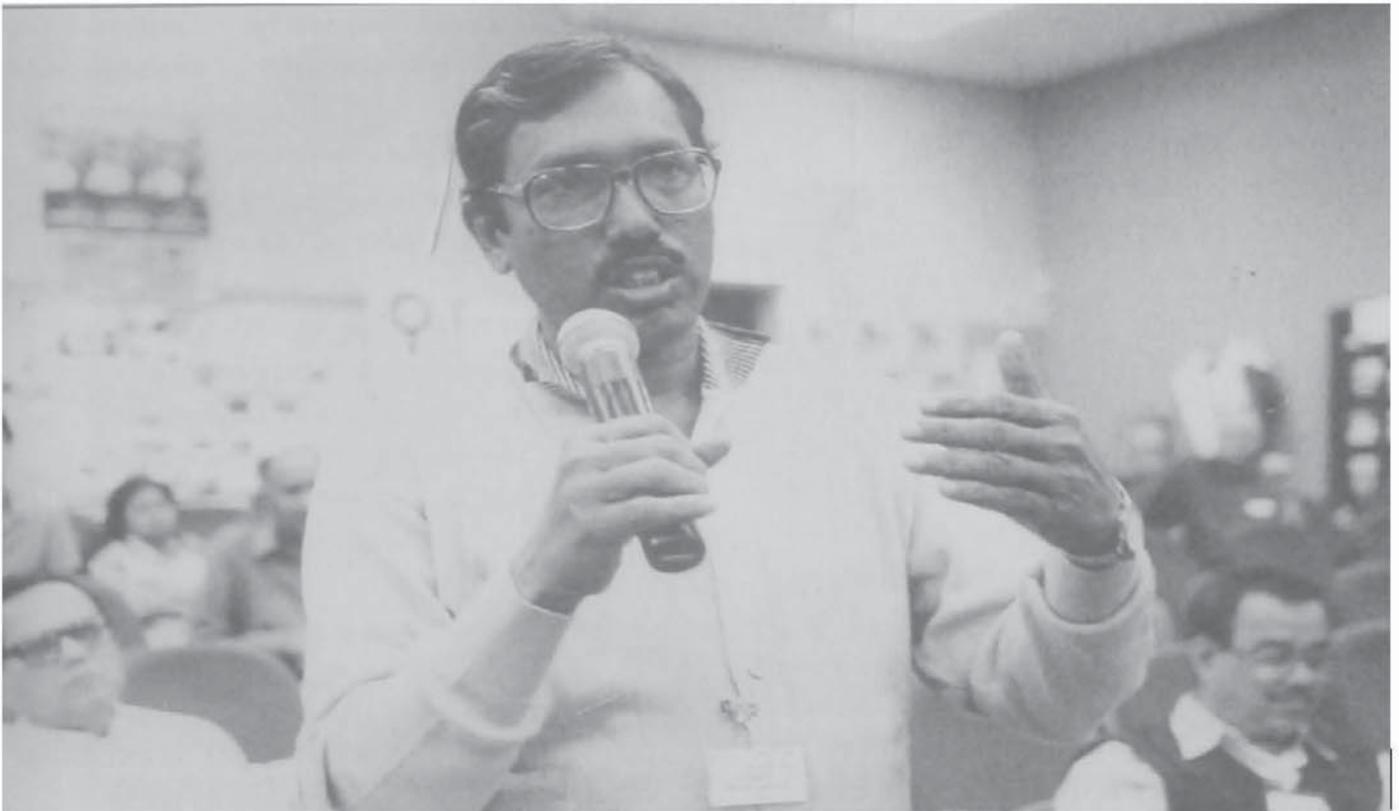
company and is based in Australia and the United Kingdom. It operates over 60 mines and processing plants in 40 countries, directly employing 51 000 people.

Rio Tinto has attracted recent union attention because of its aggressive campaign against unions in Australia and its activities in areas inhabited by indigenous peoples in countries such as Indonesia. It has moved aggressively in Australia to eliminate unions from its workforce by moving employees on to individual contracts. There have been allegations in Indonesia that the company has co-operated with military forces in campaigns against indigenous people who oppose mining activity.

Sigtur delegates expressed anger, but not surprise at the activity of Rio Tinto. They pledged themselves to distributing information on the Multinational Corporation's (MNC's) activity to their members in preparation for a wider and intensified campaign. The Sigtur organisers' goal was that, if successful, the Rio Tinto campaign could serve as an example for other campaigns against equally abusive MNCs.

### **May Day**

Sigtur participants also sought to demonstrate their solidarity by having common May Day activities in the year 2000 and 2001. They suggested exchanging leaders and having similar banners and slogans. Korean delegates volunteered to develop a common song for May Day celebrations. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) had just recently won the right to stage their own massive demonstrations on May Day in Korea. For some other delegates, celebrating May Day is illegal. Sigtur members agreed to lobby for others to have the right to celebrate May Day.



*The Sigtur conference allowed unionists and labour activists to share their knowledge and experience.*

### **Rebuilding the union base**

All Sigtur participants acknowledged that their organisations were being undermined by processes of liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation and contracting out. They raised concerns about the limited role of youth and women within the labour movement. However, labour activists had considerable difficulty in addressing specific policies that could be adopted to address the challenge of rebuilding the union base.

Conference organisers asked delegates to consider two possibilities. The first was the development of social movement unionism which is embedded in the community and makes alliances with other community groups. The difficulty here was moving from commitment in principle to practical activity. South African unions have a long experience of such activity in the struggle against apartheid, but the ties seem to be

loosening with the transition to democracy. Some delegates spoke of the difficulty of mustering community support in recent public service struggles with the government. In Australia, unions received considerable public support during the maritime dispute, but this has been difficult to sustain after the strike.

A policy paper suggested that the meeting consider the creation of a general union to organise casual and contract workers. Once organised these workers could then affiliate with industry or sector unions. The general union would develop expertise in organising casual workers, young workers and women workers. It would deploy its own resources and would assist in rebuilding the base of unions undermined by deregulation. Delegates did not directly address this proposal in the group workshops. They were more articulate in outlining their recent problems than focusing upon new

strategies to combat falling union numbers and strength.

A number of unions that had made progress in their battle against authoritarian states (COSATU during the apartheid era, KCTU in South Korea) expressed frustration that the struggle for economic justice in the successor democratic states posed new and difficult challenges. In the new environment it is less clear how to proceed against plans promoted by international agencies such as the IMF and supported by democratically elected governments. In South Africa the struggle is complicated by the fact that, at times, former comrades are on the other side of the table advocating measures which harm union members. New strategies are required for the new environment, but there is uncertainty about which strategies are most appropriate.

### **Knowledge transfer**

One important theme that emerged from the week's discussion was for unionists and academics to learn more about the process of knowledge transfer around labour issues. This applies to the transfer of knowledge in the context of North-South and South-South relations. In North-South terms, participants in a public sector workshop indicated that models for restructuring were being exported from developed countries to developing countries. The transfer of these models often left labour in a disadvantaged position. For example, unionists were often unfamiliar with criticisms of these models that had been expressed in Northern countries. They were left to work out their own views without regard to the experience of workers who had already faced such restructuring.

This indicates a need for a better understanding of the mechanisms that

facilitate these knowledge transfers. How do such models spread and who spreads them?

The export of restructuring models raises the possibility of establishing alternative transfers of knowledge. For example, if unionists faced with the latest Northern restructuring fad were in contact with public sector workers in Northern countries that had some experience in combating such plans, it might be possible for Southern public sector workers to strengthen their bargaining position. At the very least they would be aware of management strategies and intentions.

In terms of South-South knowledge transfer, unionists were eager to exchange experiences of the struggle in their respective countries. In some cases these served to foster a sense of solidarity. Some delegates wanted to hold bilateral discussions to get specific information. For example, the KCTU were eager to learn from COSATU about their experience of close ties with a governing party. In addition, the Koreans were interested in learning about how they might make a transition from company-based unions to industry-wide unions. They hoped that COSATU might be able to offer advice based upon their experience of union formation and struggle.

### **Issues for internationalism**

For five days over 100 union members and labour related NGOs considered the problem of responding to neo-liberal globalisation and worked on concrete plans to respond to the challenges of deregulation, casualisation and liberalisation. Valuable lessons were shared and actions have been planned for future activity. Sigtur participants, similar to labour activists around the world are struggling to develop a sound



*The Koreans want to move from company-based to industry-wide unions.*

internationalist strategy in the face of immense odds. Three crucial questions have emerged from the week's activities:

***'Who is involved in the struggle and how is such activity to be co-ordinated?'***

The answer requires decisions about the geographic locations of members and the possible roles they play in civil society. It can be broken down into two further questions - who is in the South and what role is there for non-union labour groups?

On the issue of Southern membership, Sigtur has tried to move from a geographical definition of 'South' to a more ideologically infused definition which incorporates social movement unions battling neo-liberal globalisation. The name change from 'Indian Ocean Initiative' to 'Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights' reflects this change in emphasis. Thus, we see the participation of Korea, which is located in the northern hemisphere and Australia while in the southern hemisphere, is not a developing country.

Presumably there will be efforts to involve other similarly minded unions such as the CUT in Brazil. This leaves open the issue of the relationship of such a network with labour activists in Canada, the United States, Western Europe and Japan. Is it better to have a space where workers away from the centre of power can work together, or is there a need to make contacts with similarly minded unions in all states?

The other issue is the relationship between unions and other sectors of civil society. A wide range of views were expressed from full co-operation with community groups and NGOs, to trying to take up NGO issues in order to replace their activity. In practical terms, the issue comes to a head when dealing with countries that lack independent unions or have very weak unions. For example, labour rights NGOs in China are very critical of the established, but state dominated All China Federation of Trade Unions. With whom should an independent trade union network such as

Sigtur operate? The role of civil society groups goes much further to encompass issues such as women's rights, environmental protection, corporate campaigns and indigenous peoples' rights.

*'What is labour's view of an alternative international order?'*

During the Sigtur event many delegates expressed opposition to the existing international order. There was no shortage of criticism of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, financial and trade liberalisation. Globalisation was often equated with imperialism and a long history of Northern-based domination. Those who suggested that there were positive elements to a shrinking world and information technology were met with heated debate.

The challenge for labour activists is to move beyond criticising existing structures to promoting a labour-friendly international order. In designing this order, labour activists must also consider short- and long-term strategies. This is not an easy task and will require considerable effort and debate. There are a host of difficult issues to be addressed. For example, what role do labour advocates see for global governance? Do labour groups favour supranational enforcement in some cases or are they always supportive of national sovereignty? If their instinct is to prefer national solutions, how can an increasingly integrated economy be managed and conflicts between states be resolved peacefully?

Such issues took a concrete form in discussions around issues such as labour standards or the regulation of investment. Should labour standards be enforceable at the World Trade Organization? If not, should labour be working towards an ILO that can do more than issue reports? An

architecture of global economic regulation is being constructed as we enter the 21st Century. What is labour's vision and plan for its evolution?

*'How do the different national experiences of union movements limit the possibilities of internationalism?'*

The Sigtur conference illustrated the diversity of union movements and forms in Southern countries. The conference participants could be divided into three main groups:

- Relatively developed unions eager to engage in 'nuts and bolts' discussion about co-operative international activity to combat neo-liberalism. This included the Australian, Korean and South African unions.
- Indian trade unions who were eager to combat globalisation, but tended to follow a more traditional model of union activity and were not as engaged in building a social movement unionism.
- People from countries where independent trade unions are very weak. This included NGOs, labour activists and unionists from China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

The variety of union organisations and ideological outlook place limits upon the types of solidarity that can be pursued. One key to furthering that solidarity is to acknowledge those differences and to build in areas where there is agreement while debating areas of disagreement. The Sigtur gathering was an example of an attempt to do just that. Its evolution will be watched closely by those concerned about the future of internationalism in the labour movement. ★

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