

The South and the North

federations of the ICFTU

For too long capital has been able to freely 'globalise' and enter markets. Labour, in contrast, has been slower to 'globalise'. We need trade union federations that can overcome geographical distances and ideological isolation. This is the way to confront the neo-liberal challenge.

At the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) congress held in Durban last year, I identified federations (see box on p 83) from the South and the North to ask about these issues. The congress was entitled 'Globalising social justice'. One thousand participants from 160 countries representing 125 million workers attended.

Trade union independence

All the federations argue for trade union independence. This means independence from governments, employers, political parties, and even the ICFTU in terms of policy. For the TUC independence is sacred. The DGB believes only independent unions can be 'successful in implementing policies and fighting for trade union and labour rights'.

Independence allows the FNV to decide its own policies of solidarity. This is also true for CUT regarding its bi-lateral relations with the Workers Central of Cuba (CTC) and multi lateral relations with COSATU and the KCTU. Independence also has an ideological side says the KCTU: 'It allows workers to

Chris Bolsmann examines the responses of trade union federations from the South and North on issues affecting them.

define their own view of the world. So they do not have to take into account capital's view of the world.'

Independence can be problematic. The TUC believes that in many countries 'it is really hard to say whether labour is independent'. For the FNV independence is a complicated situation. Most of its executive belongs to one party while about 20% of membership votes for a different party.

The ACTU concludes by calling on federations to ensure 'that future practices are aimed at organisational independence'.

Free trade

Free trade means the 'free' flow of trade between states. This is done by scrapping tariffs and protectionary barriers and the opening up of markets. Free trade can represent a danger to workers as it is usually combined with job losses.

The AFL-CIO warns about free trade: 'If developing countries open up their markets completely they subject themselves to the division of labour

imposed by multinational corporations (MNCs) and the international financial institutions (IFIs). That is disastrous'

Both the TUC and the DGB see free trade as part of our world. Yet, they believe that certain conditions must be attached to free trade. The TUC argues that 'you cannot have free trade without core labour standards'. For the DGB 'free trade is necessary, especially in the interests of the workers. However, free trade has to include social regulation. Free trade must first of all be fair trade.' The FNV also qualifies its support: 'Free trade is nice to talk about, but without conditions it is a dishonest trade. Free trade must not include child labour or restrictions on trade unions'

While there is some acceptance of free trade by the North, the Southern federations view free trade differently. For the KCTU free trade has a different meaning 'It means we have to open up our markets to let others, who are usually more powerful, in. Because they are very big and more powerful, they can cause

havoc in Korea' This point is repeated by the NLC. 'What we have is the dominance of the industrialised powers. Whatever they want to sell in the world gets sold and whatever they want suppressed gets suppressed'. The NLC questions the existence of 'free' trade.

CUT is not just accepting free trade and globalisation. It responds by raising 'discussion on alternatives to neo-liberalism'. CUT cooperates with organisations such as the Landless Movement in Brazil in finding alternatives.

Core labour standards

Core labour standards are certain basic conditions of employment such as:

- the freedom of association,
- the right to collective bargaining;
- the right not to be discriminated against;
- the outlawing of forced labour;
- the outlawing of the worst forms of child labour

All the federations agree that core labour standards are necessary. However, the

- The Central Unica dos Trabalhadores (CUT) is the biggest trade union federation in Brazil with 4,5 million members. Kjeld Aagaard Jakobsen, secretary for international relations, interviewed.
- The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) represents 400 000 workers in South Korea. Young-Mo Yoon, international secretary, interviewed
- The Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) represents 30 trade unions. John E Odah, deputy general secretary, interviewed
- The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) represent almost 13 million workers. Bill Fletcher, at the time assistant to the president, interviewed.
- The Federatie Nederlandse

Vakbeweging (FNV) represents 1,2 million workers in the Netherlands. Lodewijk de Waal, president, interviewed

- The Japanese Trade Union Confederation (JTUC-RENGO) represents 8 million workers. Etsuya Washio, president, interviewed
- The Deutsche Gesellschaft Bund (DGB) from Germany represents over 8,5 million workers. Heinz Putzhammer, executive committee member, interviewed.
- The Trade Union Congress (TUC) of Britain represents 6,7 million workers. Jenny Ainsley, TUC delegate, interviewed.
- The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) represents 2,2 million workers. Stephen Spence, ACTU delegate, interviewed

federations might hold different positions on the aspects of core labour standards.

The DGB regards core standards as very necessary in these times of increased globalisation. 'Trade unions all over the world must fight for labour and trade union rights and core labour standards. One cannot have solidarity when countries do not respect and adhere to core labour standards.'

The NLC argues that trade unions can help to ensure the adoption of core labour standards. The TUC agrees: 'We have got to fight for core labour standards. We must use our labour power to ensure success'

The KCTU and the FNV believe core labour standards should be included in the World Trade Organisation (WTO). On the other hand, CUT and the AFL-CIO believe these standards should be included in free trade agreements. The AFL-CIO and RENGO go a step further. They argue that environmental protection should also be part of free trade agreements.

These federations agree on the necessity of core labour standards. However, the TUC says 'it is very difficult to get agreement on core labour standards and to get everybody to ratify them'. RENGO concedes that there is 'competition between the developed and the developing countries. Nevertheless core labour standards are the minimum obligation that can be prescribed to a country.'

Solidarity

Differences exist between the various federations on how solidarity can be achieved.

Although solidarity is difficult to achieve, CUT believes it is possible. It defines solidarity as 'joining other unions' struggles or building coalitions on common issues. If there is a fight in another country, we try to add numbers to

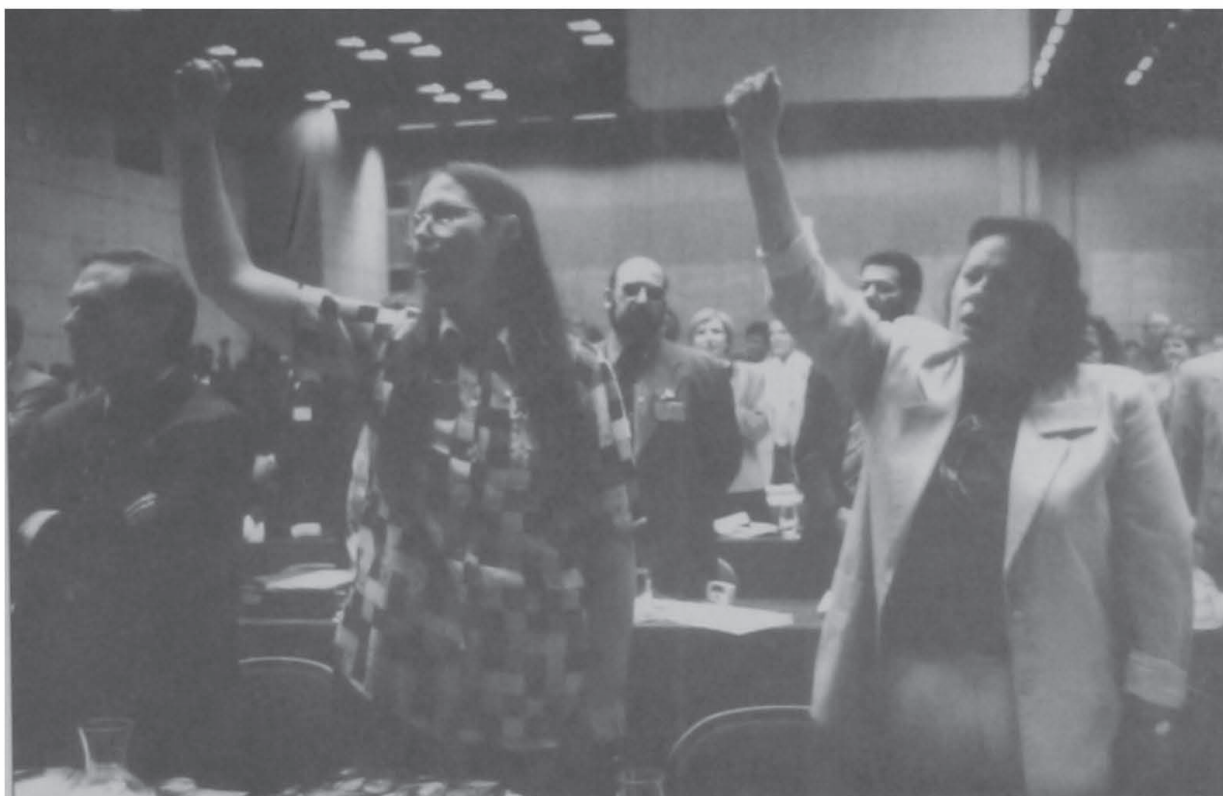
it, publicise it and run joint campaigns. That is solidarity! CUT believes labour could form alliances on the abolition of child and forced labour, better jobs, training, and equality in the workplace.

But CUT also sees solidarity as meaning more than that: 'It is about helping to produce a system that can increase the wealth of people in poorer countries.' CUT uses the example of MNCs that 'do not contribute anything to the local economy. They create jobs that are exploitative and pollute the environment. Trade union movements should raise this issue. That is what solidarity is about today.'

The NLC agrees that trade unions need solidarity. However, it warns that solidarity should not be at the expense of the workers. 'We need to find ways of reaching the workers. What form of solidarity do they need?' The NLC has some ideas on how to obtain solidarity: 'You get a firm grip of your sub region. These countries are more likely to have shared your experiences. Then you move to your continent and then the rest of the world. This is done with a clear understanding of other countries and their issues and perspectives.'

The AFL-CIO speaks a similar language to the NLC. The AFL-CIO points out that 'countries have a right to self-determination. Many of us industrialised, developed countries often forget this. There should be no inconsistency between labour solidarity and independent development and self-determination.'

Solidarity for the TUC means ensuring that the ILO conventions benefit the people from the South. 'In the North we already have pretty good standards. We have to think in a more international way about what we are doing. Trade unions could pressure and lobby governments to take a firm stand on trade union rights.



pic: James Riey/epa

The federations of the South believe the ICFTU should restructure.

This could be very effective.' However, the TUC admits that it is quite difficult to get trade unionists excited about international issues

The ACTU worries about the impact of declining membership on solidarity actions 'It is already difficult to achieve improvements for workers internationally. It will be even more so if the unions fighting for those improvements don't have any members. Declining membership is compromising the work that is being done.'

The road ahead for the ICFTU

The ICFTU is the largest confederation representing trade unions internationally. It has operated for over 50 years. Cold war issues and a bureaucratic structure make its work more difficult. If it is to be effective these problems need to be addressed.

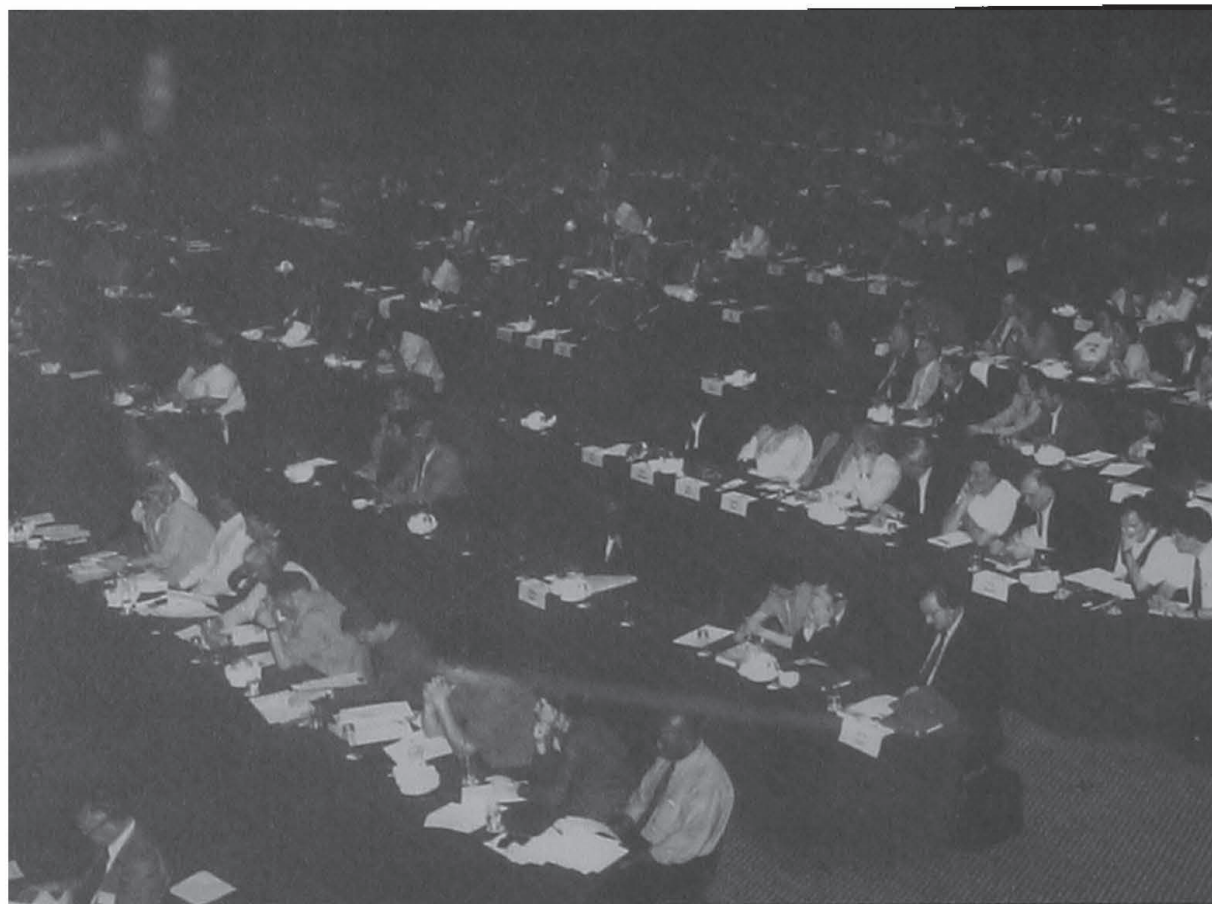
CUT believes that 'the ICFTU needs to restructure itself as it still has the same

structures as in 1949'. The NLC shares this sentiment. It hopes the ICFTU 'will realise that there is a need to reform the organisation to purge it of the cold war politics. This will allow the ICFTU to act in the interests of the workers of the developing countries'

According to the KCTU, the trade unions of the developing countries 'are questioning the way that the international trade union movement is operating. The ICFTU has to restructure internally. Then it can strengthen the labour movements in the South and be a vehicle to build international labour solidarity'

For the ACTU the current reform and democratisation within the ICFTU are correct. But the ACTU questions how long it will take for the changes to sweep through such a bureaucratized structure. If it takes too long it will not make a difference in the lives of individual workers.

For most of the federations of the



Pic: Jeeva Rajgopal

A thousand participants from 160 countries attended the ICFTU congress.

North, the questions about the ICFTU regard its functions. For RENGO 'the exchange of knowledge is important. In Japan we could use the knowledge of the trade unions from the western industrialised countries, especially America.' The TUC wants the ICFTU to look seriously at how to deal with MNCs. For the FNV 'it is very important to know what is going on in another country. We have to network and move forward in a modern way. Not in the old-fashioned centralised way that we do now. The Internet could be used to connect countries in a more informal way.' For the DGB the goal of the ICFTU in the next few years should be to create solidarity between the North and the South.

Finally, the FNV warns the ICFTU against acting like some governments. 'Governments have different punishments

for different sized countries. If a country is very big and important then its offences seem to melt away like snow in the summer. That is a pity. We should be aware that we do not introduce that in the ICFTU as well.'

Conclusion

There are differences between the federations of the South and the North. However, these should not stop cooperation. It should encourage contact and collaboration on issues affecting the federations. Contact can create space where differences can be discussed and similarities found. This can realise the interests of the working class around the world. ★

Chris Bolsmann lectures in the Department of Sociology at Rand Afrikaans University.