

# Why does the WSSD matter to workers?

*As the countdown to the WSSD begins, questions abound about the prospects for its success. How will the tensions within South African civil society organisations impact on the conference? Will the politicians manage to craft a meaningful political declaration? What can be done about the United States? Amidst all these concerns **Alistair Smith** explores the relevance of the event for workers and the approach adopted by Global Unions.*

Since the first environmental world conference in the 1970s much progress has been made in our understanding of the links between social, environmental, and economic decisions and outcomes.

Notwithstanding the problems associated with the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, its focus on the concept of sustainable development helped to draw attention to the ecological and social limits of economic growth and development. In the preparatory process leading up to the WSSD some developing countries, civil society organisations including organised labour have argued for the need to place equitable economic development and poverty eradication high on the agenda.

The decade since Rio has also seen a greater concern with globalisation and the beneficiaries or otherwise of this process. There is enough evidence to show that in general increased integration is associated with rising levels of inequality, within and between countries. Therefore, in an era of 'globalisation' the 'sustainable development' challenges means dealing

with two interrelated problems, which strike, at the heart of worker's welfare both as producers and consumers.

Globalisation implies:

- a more intensive and 'global'

interdependence between environmental, economic and social policy choices and outcomes;

- an uncertain regulatory environment in which forms of self regulation (free



GUY STUBBS

markets) are gaining greater influence in the light of underdeveloped forms of democratic supra national governance coupled with the apparent retreat of national public forms of regulation.

The WSSD brings all of these issues sharply into focus. It is therefore not a question of whether organised labour should engage in the WSSD process but on what terms they should engage.

#### **Organised labour's engagement with the WSSD**

In an effort to improve consultations with non-state actors the UN has developed a system of multi stakeholder dialogues in which major groups of civil society are able to participate and 'influence' the WSSD agenda and outcomes. The Global Unions (ICFTU, TUAC and ITSS) have acted as the main voice of organised labour and have outlined their approach in a comprehensive discussion document entitled 'Fashioning a New Deal'. The document deals with the following issues:

- placing the Social Dimension at the centre of the new deal;
- focus on workplace approaches to Agenda 21 and New Deal;
- changing behaviour patterns: from workplace to personal life;
- specific trade union priorities;
- improving working and living conditions for the World's workers;
- defining a new role for countries and governments.

The document places a strong emphasis on the need to integrate the social dimension of sustainable development into the ecological and economic dimensions. Socioeconomic security and poverty reduction is given a central emphasis and hence employment creation, decent work and respect for core labour standards. The notion of a 'just transition' is a useful proposition. It

calls for restructuring to be based on guaranteeing socioeconomic security of workers.

A preference is shown for localised decision-making and workplace-based approaches along the lines of the models developed for Occupational Health and Safety. The document also calls for education programmes to facilitate the shift in consumer behaviour for workers. The document adopts a global approach to dealing with poverty in which industrialised countries must take the lead. This includes dealing with the negative effects of liberalisation, biased trade rules, and doing more to finance development. The document also calls for an improvement in the living conditions of farmworkers, women, children and youth. It specifically prioritises: the need to 'strengthen public management of vital utilities; fight HIV/AIDS; harmonisation and safe use of chemicals; sustainable transport energy and forestry; and improving conditions for workers in the tourism and farming sectors.

The Global Unions document is a welcome point of departure for building a global platform for sustainable development. It covers many of the critical areas where workers are likely to be affected. The emphasis is on 'integration of the social dimension' of sustainable development, the need to guarantee socioeconomic rights and the notion of just transition are especially significant.

The document does, however, reveal some weaknesses: The broad scope of the issues covered in the document runs the risk of reducing it to a 'wish list', without any clear sense of critical and priority areas. It is not clear if the document is meant as a negotiating document or a platform for building broader unity. While there is some acknowledgement of the negative

impact of liberalisation and globalisation there is no substantive analysis of the potential economic trade-offs involved in, for example, the link between trade and wages or employment or of the link between trade and poverty.

The document also (unwittingly perhaps) masks many of the North-South contradictions and it pays insufficient attention to the unequal power relations within the global economy. For example, although there is talk of a 'new role for countries and governments', the current system of de facto global governance based on US hegemony and the interests of corporate globalisation is left more or less unchallenged. This gives the impression that reforms in global governance are possible without radical shifts in the distribution of power. Lastly, while the document goes a long way towards emphasising the centrality of poverty eradication its overall approach still seems heavily biased in terms of traditional northern trade union approaches, thus for example, the emphasis on labour standards and technical workplace-based approaches.

#### **Conclusion**

Notwithstanding the above criticisms the Global Union remains a useful document. It remains to be seen how much of the labour group proposals will be adopted in the final text, assuming a final text is eventually agreed. Given the politics of the WSSD it is however unlikely that many of the Global Union proposals will be included. Does this mean that workers should ignore the WSSD? On the contrary the WSSD provides a focus for organised labour to raise the debates and awareness within civil society as well as build broad opposition and alternatives to the system of global capitalism.

*Smith is a researcher at Naledi.*