

NGG Congress; November 11, 2013

Contribution by Ron Oswald, IUF general secretary

Let me first bring you the support and solidarity of our global membership, the more than 10 million workers represented by our 390 affiliates in 127 countries worldwide.

It is a pleasure and a privilege to address your Congress. I am particularly pleased to do so to pay tribute to my friend and great trade unionist Franz Josef Möllenberg whom I know is stepping down as president of the NGG at this congress. I feel particularly privileged to have worked with Franz Josef over many years and count him as one of our finest internationalists and one of the most committed and principled IUF Vice-Presidents I have known over my 26 years with the IUF. For all your support and your friendship I thank you Franz Josef on my personal behalf and on behalf of our entire membership. I also would like to warmly congratulate your next president Michaela Rosenberger and your entire leadership with whom I look forward to standing shoulder-to-shoulder with in the coming years.

Your congress takes place at a time when the labour movement everywhere faces a general assault on rights: the right to work, the right to a decent, stable permanent job, the right to a safe workplace, the right of workers to join unions, the right to basic services like health and education, and, for one in seven of the world's population, the right to food, nutrition and life itself.

In Latin America the brutal oppression of human rights has returned notably Honduras and Guatemala.

In Asia, despite a welcome ray of hope in Burma, we still must fight against an economic model that serves the rich and denies the full access to rights and dignity to the majority in the name of economic development.

In Africa the daily struggle to survive, the need to fight for the right to food and nutrition remains a global scandal together with the fact that more than one billion people in our world are denied both.

In North Africa and the Middle East we see still unfinished revolutions in a fight for democracy that is just beginning and ongoing suffering as war continues to rage in the region.

And in Europe we see a construction that too often works against the interests of workers as employers exploit all the economic and financial benefits of a borderless Europe whilst undermining the hopes that many held for a Europe with guaranteed social standards.

And to compound an already challenging situation we now have the tidal wave of austerity in its crudest forms across almost all European countries. Austerity that attacks the less wealthy and the poor whilst leaving those with wealth to accumulate more and more built on the sacrifices working people are asked to make. Social protections are not only under pressure, they are being systematically attacked and dismantled.

And with that austerity has come a threat to democracy. The Greek people's rights have been significantly compromised as the financial technocrats impose reforms in the interests of major financial players and scavenging investors. Public education, health and other public services, which for workers and the poorer parts of our societies represent the only wealth we can hope to have are being stripped away whilst the privately wealthy thrive. The tax burden on those least able to pay rises to pay for austerity whilst the wealthy slide through tax loophole after tax loophole moving like locusts from one country to another in the name of greed.

Whilst the Greek people suffer as they are told they must face huge sacrifices and suffering to limit Greek debt companies like Coca-Cola Hellenic cynically move their corporate headquarters from Athens to Switzerland to avoid corporation tax. When Francois Holland proposes to tax the rich David Cameron invites the wealthy parasites to move to the UK to avoid tax.

It is surely time to recognize that the social compromise that had been assumed existed in Europe is scarcely visible today. And rightly workers throughout Europe are taking up that challenge in ongoing actions and increasingly European-wide unity.

Mass actions in Spain, Greece, Italy, Belgium and elsewhere are important elements of resistance. It is surely time for us to build a permanent and even more aggressive fight back in Europe way

beyond the reliance on increasingly marginalized social dialogue that still pervades too much of what we do.

And time is not on our side. As our rights and public wealth are eroded in Europe, in large part because of a European Union that is dominated by market interests, forces on the political far right are moving to exploit the deep discord that exists amongst our members and the dispossessed in much of Europe. Le Pen on the far right in France has moved her rhetoric from a crude one of racism and anti-immigration to include a more sophisticated rhetoric focused on popular unease about the current construction of Europe.

The threat from the far right in Europe is real and any complacency on our part would be criminal especially as so many of our own union members are drifting into the clutches of the anti-Europe right. And those forces on the right are no defenders of human rights. Once they have stripped rights from migrants, once they have discriminated on the basis of race or religion and taken rights from minority groups they will come for us in the labour movement even more than that do today. We have seen it before and we would be foolish in the extreme if we allowed our complacency to lead us to believe and to act as though it could never happen again.

And appearing as apologists for today's European construction that so obviously favours capital in the way we too often do today is no answer. That will alienate still more of our members and frankly rightly so.

We need to channel the anger and the desperation that I know exists amongst our members in Europe to call for a radical and progressive transformation of Europe. We need to challenge capital within today's European construction with struggle and action beyond talk of social partnership and social dialogue. Clinging to a model of social partnership and social dialogue which our counterparts on the other side abandoned years ago in what is self-evidently a class war will only further marginalize us.

Our European and international labour movement that needs to agitate and yes politicize its members more than we do today. We need a movement that is its members. One that embraces those outside formal trade unions who fight for the same things we should be fighting for. A movement that recognizes its weaknesses and its mistakes – and yes we have no shortage of both. A movement that seeks to counter the kind of political brainwashing our members and workers in general get from much of the mainstream media's politically influenced nonsense. A movement that understands that if we lose the fight for progressive political power we will lose any hope of defending and advancing our rights and interest in the longer term.

We need to put people in power who have the political will and the courage to put an end to the political fear of those who have the greatest wealth, be they individuals or corporations. And that will not be easy, particularly starting where we are today in Europe and in much of the rest of the world. Today progressive governments who are actually practicing progressive politics can pretty much be counted on the fingers of both hands because they are so few.

Sounds naïve? Sounds impossible? Frankly I do not care much how it sounds. Because the way I see the world today a fight back based on radical progressive politics is not something we can choose or not choose. We do not have that luxury. We do not have that choice if we claim we truly want to build the kind of societies we say we stand for and we believe can exist.

What form should our fight back take?

Clearly it has to be political as we fight for governments that will defend working people ahead of the rich and privileged. Governments that commit to pursue democratic socialist politics, principles and practices. Governments that will not just promise to do so as they fight to get elected but will fight to do so after they are elected.

And in our workplaces we must also intensify our efforts to defend permanent work and reverse the trend towards casual, temporary, agency and other forms of precarious work. Precarious workers can rarely access their rights at work and therefore the growth of these insecure forms of work increases the vulnerability of individual workers and weakens the collective voice of workers through their union. The result is lower wages, poorer working conditions and less healthy and more dangerous jobs. Collective bargaining is at the end of the day for better wages and conditions and therefore needs to focus on job protection and fighting precarious work as a key component.

Secondly we have to hold companies to account for their investment decisions. Are companies investing in productive ways which will protect and create jobs and care for communities and the environment? Or are they cost cutting, asset stripping and outsourcing in a frantic effort to meet shareholder's short term profit expectations and in the process destroying productive enterprises and decent jobs?

Thirdly more than ever before we must link with workers and their unions across national borders. Transnational Companies move capital around the globe seeking competitive advantage so we must defend ourselves by supporting workers everywhere to access their rights, particularly the right to join a union and bargain collectively.

Against that background what can we do? Well simply put we can fight back. Fight back politically in the wider society and fight back through our unions. Our 26th World Congress theme in May last year was "Organize, Fight and Win".

In the IUF affiliates are working to do just that. Building on courageous and often inspirational fighting local memberships we are getting organized internationally in major companies and sectors, we are fighting back and we are winning.

In Nestle, the world's largest food company, our members organized internationally behind Indonesian workers who were fired en masse. Four days after our Congress ended in May last year Nestlé signed an agreement with the IUF at a meeting in London reinstating all 53 union members dismissed, compensating them fully for eight months without work and fully restoring their union rights. They now have 90% of workers in the union and a new collective agreement which include wages and a wage scale for the first time ever.

In Coca-Cola we got organized internationally to support workers in Pakistan. The entire Coca-Cola Pakistan operation, six bottling plants and a major distribution centre are now 100% unionized. And using the negotiating table we have secured at global level with Coca-Cola this year we have now successfully negotiated the space needed for Coca-Cola workers in Guatemala to form unions today in every Coca-Cola plant in that country.

In the USA we got organized internationally in Danone and we were able to ensure management did not interfere in workers' efforts to unionize in five Danone plants all of which are now unionized. We did the same in Danone in Turkey and Australia. Danone is one of the targets for our campaign to build 100% union membership across a company's global operations.

In Smithfield meats in the USA we got organized, particularly in France and Poland, in support our affiliate the UFCW and the union succeeded in organizing thousands of new Smithfield meat workers.

In Unilever across their beverage operations globally we got ourselves organized to engage the company and have secured what are now thousands of permanent jobs where there were once only indecent contracted and outsourced jobs. And those permanent workers are now union members. And we saw just how important it was to workers and their families. When the first 400 newly permanent workers went back to work their families came to the factory gates to celebrate. Why? Simply put because their lives had been transformed. For the first time they had the prospect of lifting themselves out of the abject poverty a contract worker in South Asia is trapped within. They are still poor but they have hope. And as happens we had weddings as they build lives they could not have imagined as contract workers. And some months later a number of them had babies which also happens when economic stability improves. And those babies in Khanewal Pakistan are known by those workers as "IUF babies" because they knew they could have families only as a result of their incredible courage to fight locally and the support their membership of the IUF brought them to enhance their chance of winning. That is what a decent job, union membership, dignity and better economic security brought to those hundred of workers in Khanewal and in many other places we have now had similar wins.

And your union, with all all our members can be proud of the role you played in support of so many of those successes.

And this list goes on and will grow as we put our "Organize, Fight and Win" mandate to work across the IUF's sectors.

And now we face long campaigns in defence of members in Mondelez (formerly Kraft) and PepsiCo.

Mondelez believe that the struggles for rights and democracy in Egypt and Tunisia have no place in their plants. So they fired union leaders who were helping build independent unions in both countries. Mondelez is finding out that the fight for rights, the fight for independent unions will not be stopped by them at the gates of their factories.

PepsiCo believe that by using a contractor to run operations in India they can avoid responsibility for abusive employment practices and repression of workers' rights. Their response to the IUF was "these worker are not our's so we wash our hands of these abuses". PepsiCo is wrong and our task is to make them accept that fact.

Both these critical struggles might last a long time...but, if our members locally fight on, such long struggles are nothing new to the IUF. Unilever in Pakistan took almost three years and Nestle in Indonesia took two and a half years..... our common struggles for what are fundamental human rights cannot be measured in time...they can only be measured in success and we fight on until we win.

In all these cases and in many others we faced major companies that in one way or another abused the rights of our members and future members. We organized, we fought and we won those rights as we will in Mondelez and PepsiCo. And we will need to do the same even more intensely and effectively in the future.

And to do that we need to increasingly recognize that we cannot do it alone. Today we need each other more than ever before. Your union has always recognized the need for practical and meaningful international solidarity and has always been prepared to back that with concrete action and concrete support. Most recently for example your great support for the rights of the world's domestic workers and for having successfully fought for the critical ratification of Convention 189 here in Germany. For that I thank you on behalf of our members everywhere. But your members also need the support of others and critically need us to build a world where rights and decent jobs are the norm. A world where a race to the bottom is not only possible but inevitable is not something we can afford to hand future generations of workers in Germany or anywhere else. Your union understands that as well as any other affiliate in the IUF and therefore I know will support our international "Organize, Fight and Win" mandate in the coming years.

Of course as you know from your own struggles in Germany even if we get organized we cannot always guarantee we win. Even if we fight we cannot always guarantee that we win. But let me close by stating the obvious. If we neither organize nor fight we can guarantee we will lose. I wish you a successful congress, thank you for your patience this afternoon. You can always count on the support of the IUF and I know our members everywhere can always count on solidarity and support from the NGG.

Thank you.