



Global Solidarity News

No. 16 August 2010

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Solidarity Committees

The Solidarity committees (NI and ROI) continue to be the vital link between Congress and affiliates on solidarity issues. These committees work closely with the Global Solidarity Project to ensure that it reaches affiliated unions of Congress and meet regularly during the year. They continue to act as a link between the project, their individual unions, and the membership.

These Committees encourage affiliates to engage with the project and seek to embed solidarity linking within trade union structure.

Some affiliates (for example NIPSA, IMPACT and PSEU) have formed their own structures to engage with international solidarity issues.

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Congress would like to acknowledge the continued support of Irish Aid for our development education work.

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Welcome

Development education and international solidarity

Congress' Global Solidarity programme has two important components; development education and international solidarity work. We need more knowledge to better understand our increasingly interdependent world. Therefore we need development education. The Global Solidarity Champions courses and summer schools are important tools in our own trade union development education, which has been made possible thanks to important funding by Irish Aid.

The Global Solidarity Champions training courses play a vital role in raising awareness of the causes of exploitation, poverty and climate change. This knowledge gives us the possibility to work in solidarity to challenge the global inequalities. Thanks to the training courses we have increased our knowledge about the dangerous situation for trade unionists in Colombia; we have learnt about the extreme exploitation of garment workers in global south; we know much more about globalisation, migration and the migrant workers exposed situation; and we are more aware of the threat against life itself caused by climate change.

This knowledge would be just depressing, if it was not linked to possibilities to work to transform the social, economic and political structures of our world. Therefore Congress' Global Solidarity programme has also created organisations and networks for concrete and sustained solidarity work.

The Justice For Colombia network was created in December 2008 to support the struggle of trade unions in Colombia – the most dangerous country in the world to be a trade unionist. We have successfully waged an awareness campaign among the Irish public and lobby work vis-à-vis MEPs and TDs on the issue of human and trade union rights in Colombia.

Together with Trocaire, Comhlamh, Mandate and Re-Dress we will soon launch the Irish branch of the Clean Clothes Campaign, which is focused on educating and mobilising consumers. When consumers demand that their clothes and sportswear is produced under decent working conditions, things can start to change.

The Global Solidarity Committee has formed a working group on trafficking and forced labour, which has developed strong cooperation with the Migrants Right Centre and the Immigrant Council of Ireland as well as the government's Anti Human Trafficking Unit. Solidarity with victims of trafficking and forced labour in Ireland is global solidarity in our own country.

The Global Solidarity Committee successfully proposed to ICTU's Executive Council to form a working group on climate change. This will be the first step in joining trade unions around the world in their work for a just transition to an environmentally and socially sustainable society.

We are grateful to Irish Aid for their support to the development education component of our Global Solidarity programme. The active international solidarity work is our own duty, interest and commitment.



Logo for the Big Swap



Migrant workers' rights demonstration 2nd of June. Photo: Paula Geraghty



"We want the right to change employer", 2nd of June. Photo: Paula Geraghty



Act Now on 2015 Keep the aid target! Leon Farrell/Photocall Ireland

The Big Swap

"The Big Swap" was the theme of this year's Fairtrade Fortnight that ran from 22 February – 7 March. ICTU Global Solidarity and several of Congress' affiliated unions supported the campaign that asked the nation swap their usual "stuff" for Fairtrade products. But you don't have to wait for the next campaign week to act. You can start today; swap your usual tea, coffee, chocolate or bananas for Fairtrade tea, coffee, chocolate or bananas.

Each swap that you make helps raise the issues that affect farmers, workers and farming communities. It proves to companies and governments alike that Ireland wants a fairer trading system. One of the Fairtrade campaign speakers was Hella Alikuru from Uganda, representing the International Union of Food workers. She also spoke at the ICTU Women's Conference on the 6th of March in Belfast. Hella Alikuru emphasised how much Fairtrade means to female agricultural workers in Africa. It ensures them work, education and dignity.

€126,669 to the Haiti Emergency Campaign

The International Trade Union Confederation launched a solidarity campaign in response to the earthquake in Haiti which took place in January. Trade Unions around the world mobilised support on an extraordinary scale. The fund will be used for the reconstruction of Haiti and support of the Haitian trade union movement. Congress itself has contributed €126,669 in the Haiti Emergency Campaign. CWU donated an impressive €90,000 to this Campaign, important contributions also came from SIPTU, NIPSA, PSEU, INTO, MANDATE and UNISON. The ITUC has called for a major international aid mobilisation for the country's devastated infrastructure and economy with social protection, creation of decent work and respect for workers rights, including support to the Haitian trade union movement at the top of the agenda in for Haiti's reconstruction.

Demonstration for migrant workers' rights

On the 2nd of June members of ICTU Global Solidarity took part in a demonstration outside the offices of the Minister for Enterprise Mr. Batt O'Keefe, TD, calling on him to give migrant workers employed through the employment permit system, the right to change employer. The current system binds a worker to one employer. This is a leading factor in the exploitation of workers. According to the Migrants Rights Centre of Ireland (MRCI) which organised the protest, 80% of the cases of exploitation it deals with, involve workers in the employment permit system. More than 200 people participated in the demonstration. They demanded an administrative change which would give people the freedom to leave exploitative conditions and find alternative work within their work category. SIPTU Vice President, Patricia King, told the demonstration that while "the government could bail out bankers and the rich they were refusing basic rights for the most vulnerable workers."

On the 9th of June MRCI, in conjunction with Congress, organised a roundtable debate on forced labour in Ireland. This issue is clearly linked to the problems with the employment permit system. The roundtable was chaired by Moira Leydon, chairperson of ICTU's Global Solidarity Committee. The main speakers were Eilis Barry, Barrister of Law and Sean Bamford of Trade Union Congress UK who spoke on legislative proposals, and trade union response, to tackling forced labour. Globalisation has led to a huge increase in migrant workers throughout the world. Migrant workers' rights are an issue of Global Solidarity, which starts here in Ireland.

Keep the aid target!

On the 23rd of April, Congress and 61 other organisations joined the campaign "Act now on 2015". The campaign, which follows up last year's "We Do Care" campaign, calls on the government to deliver on its promise to reach the UN target of spending 0.7% of national income on overseas aid by 2015. Ireland international reputation is built on its long held commitment to the world's poor. Even in tough economic times, aid is affordable. 0.7% is not just a number – it is trained teachers and doctors; it is more schools and hospitals; it is people living their lives with hope and dignity. Our aid promise is something to be proud of. Ireland must act now to keep it. Read more about the campaign: www.actnow2015.ie

Global Solidarity Champions training course

Interactive teaching, dynamic discussions and concrete solidarity work

Overall this is an excellent course, said Pat Hennessy member of ESBOA in County Claire after finishing the Global Solidarity Champions training course on the 22nd of July.

For Pat the session with the Colombian trade unionist Jorge Gamboa made the biggest impact.

Jorge gave a face to the real trade union struggle, said Pat after meeting the Colombian trade union leader who has survived three attempts against his life.

Meeting Jorge gave a proper understanding of the difficulties that trade unionists worldwide experience, whilst just looking for basic human rights, concluded Pat who now wants to take part in the solidarity work for Colombia and hopes to form a solidarity committee in ESBOA.

This was the third of Congress' Global Solidarity Champions training courses. So far more than 30 trade unionists have taken part in the 5 day training course, which is the main tool in Congress' development education programme, which also includes the Global Solidarity summer schools and forum. The development education component in the Global Solidarity programme is funded by Irish Aid.

Without the funding from Irish Aid it would be impossible for Congress to keep both the quality and the quantity of the development education programme, comments Stellan Hermansson who, as Global Solidarity Officer in ICTU, developed and runs the programme.

Each training course has been evaluated by the participants and contributes to developing a more comprehensive and interlinked programme. Today the course covers many different issues but the structure of each day tries to logically link things together.

For example at the latest course, the first day started with a discussion about what global solidarity and equality means to each of the participants and if there is a difference between charity and solidarity. These questions lead to a fruitful ideological debate. In the afternoon the Colombian trade union leader Jorge Gamboa first spoke about his own life and experiences as a trade union leader. He then presented the very difficult social and political situation in Colombia and the importance of international solidarity to change things for the better. The participants had many personal and political questions for Jorge in the following discussion. So the day started with a lively debate on how to define concepts such as global solidarity – and it ended with a concrete example on how important global solidarity is in practice.

Another example was when international labour standards were in focus. The day started with a much appreciated and vivid presentation of the International Labour Organisation by Nick Grisewood, who is the Executive Director of the Global March against Child Labour. Nick Grisewood's interactive teaching engaged the participants in a dynamic debate. The role and importance of ILO was clarified as well as the problems that ILO has to make the important conventions a reality in the globalised labour market. The ILO theme was followed up with a session on gender equality from a global solidarity perspective, presented by Congress' Development Officer David Joyce. The presentation was mixed with several small group discussions on different equality issues and gave a better understanding of womens' employment options in the global south which very often are unregulated, unprotected jobs with no rights to social security. The day's final speaker was Aoife Smith of the Migrants Right Centre who spoke about Domestic Workers situation in Ireland and showed a film where several women from the Philippines shared their experience of both being isolated and exploited as domestic workers. Aoife also emphasised the need for an ILO convention to protect domestic workers rights. All participants were shocked by the degree of exploitation these migrant workers have to face.

Aoife Smith's presentation showed that we have much more exploitation in Ireland than I thought, said Pat Hennessy.

The vast majority of the participants in the training courses so far, have actively engaged in the global solidarity work after becoming Global Solidarity Champions. John O'Brien, who took part in the first training course 2009 said:



The third group of Global Solidarity Champions at the end of the course on the 22nd of June, from left: Pat Hennessy ESBOA, Annette Dolan TUI, Stellan Hermansson Global Solidarity Officer ICTU, Anne Treanor PSEU, Vivienne Lawler intern ICTU, David Joyce Development Officer ICTU, Yvonne O'Callaghan SIPTU, Michael Roche Wexford Council of Trade Unions, Anne Piggott ASTI. (Dennis J Walsh CPSU and Paddy Healy TUI also took part in the course but were not present the last day). Photo: John Chaney



John O'Brien speaks in the group discussions at the first training course in March/April 2009, also in the picture; Alison Gilliland INTO, Conor McKinney CPSU and Keivan Jackson MANDATE. Photo: John Chaney

Nuala O'Brien presented Irish Aid's development policy and Irish Aid's support to important ILO programmes for development. Her interactive presentation was much appreciated by the participants at the last day of the course. Photo: John Chaney



It gave me a great insight into the possibilities of how the trade union movement, both nationally and internationally, could have a significant role in promoting and actively supporting change in the lives of working people in the developing world.

John is now representing INTO in the Global Solidarity Committee and is active in the trade union network Justice For Colombia. He also contributed to INTO's decision to support Congress' partnership programme with Lesotho Congress of Democratic Unions, which is a trade union capacity building and HIV/AIDS information project.

Niall McGuirk PSEU took part in the second training course last year said:

Most importantly the course spoke about how we as trade unionists can help to make this world a better place for all. Start at your very own workplace.

Niall has, together with a friend, already organised lunch meetings with global solidarity themes in his own workplace. He is also active in PSEU's own Solidarity Committee and in Justice For Colombia.

All the Global Solidarity Champions and the Committee members will meet on the 27-28 of August at the Global Solidarity Forum in Dublin. The Forum has 4 themes; Climate Change; Clean Clothes Campaign; Palestine and Colombia. The "Champions" and Committee members will listen to interesting speakers and discuss how to develop our trade union movement's solidarity work.

ICTU Global Solidarity joins IDEA

ICTU Global Solidarity has applied for membership in the **Irish Development Education Association (IDEA)**. This is a national platform for organisations and individuals engaged in development education throughout the island of Ireland. For IDEA, development education is an educational response and process aimed at increasing awareness and understanding of the shared development of our world.

IDEA encourages and co-ordinates good communication and cooperation at all levels of the development education membership. IDEA's mission is to identify, develop and promote best practice in development education. Among IDEA's more than 70 members are Concern, Trocaire, Comhlamh and Amnesty International.

Global Solidarity Champions programme

Day 1

- > Introduction to the training course and global solidarity
- > Being a trade unionist in Colombia, A Personal Story
- > The struggle for Human and Trade Union rights in Colombia.

Day 2

- > ILO, core labour standards and ILO conventions.
- > The international trade union movement's work for gender equality
- > Domestic workers' fight for Decent Work

Day 3

- > How free trade and the World Trade Organisation affects the Global South
- > The international trade union movement view on trade and the global financial institutions that support it
- > Globalisation, the transnational companies and the race to the bottom
- > The Clean Clothes Campaign
- > Fair Trade in the World and in Ireland

Day 4

- > How climate change affects us and the Global South
- > Climate change and the trade union movement
- > Globalisation and Migration.
- > Migrant Workers and Forced Labour in Ireland
- > Sextrafficking to Ireland.

Day 5

- > Irish Aid's Development Policy
- > Irish Aid's support to the ILO programmes
- > Conclusion and evaluation of the course

Would you like to join the next training course?

You will be very welcome to join the next Global Solidarity Champions course which starts in November 2010. Please contact the Global Solidarity office in Dublin.

Clean Clothes Campaign



Textile workers in production line, textile industry in Beijing China. Photo: © ILO/Crozet M.



Sally Anne Kinahan, ICTU



Samantha Maher, CCC



Silvana Cappuccio, ITGLWF

Clean Clothes Campaign soon to be established in Ireland: Educate and mobilise consumers

As part of the preparations to launch an Irish branch of Clean Clothes Campaign, a public meeting was held in Dublin on the 25th of May. More than 50, mostly young, people attended. Almost all of them signed a list declaring their interest to join the work of an Irish Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC).

The CCC is dedicated to improving working conditions and supporting the empowerment of workers in the garment and sportswear industry in the global south. CCC is focused on educating and mobilising consumers. When consumers demand that their clothes and sportswear is produced under decent work conditions, things can start to change. CCC is lobbying companies and governments, asking them to respect workers' rights. Direct solidarity with garment workers and their trade unions is also a part of CCC's important activities.

The Clean Clothes Campaign already exists in 14 European countries. ICTU Global Solidarity is working together with the retail workers' union Mandate, the Ethical Fashion group Re-Dress and the two development NGOs; Trocaire and Comhlamh.

Individual members will also be very welcome to join the activities of CCC.

At the meeting the Chairperson Sally Anne Kinahan, Assistant General Secretary of Congress, emphasised the positive results we can achieve by working together. Each progressive organisation, with their own identity, enriches the process when building a network organisation like the Clean Clothes Campaign.

Samantha Maher represented the CCC international network said that; "all garment workers –regardless of sex, age, country of origin, legal status, employment status or location –have a right to good and safe working conditions and earn a living wage, which allows them to live in dignity." Samantha emphasised the role of the consumers; "the public has a right to know where and how their garments and sports shoes are produced". She declared that CCC all over Europe "takes action to see that workers' rights are respected. However, the CCC does not generally endorse boycotts as a tool for action".

The film "Race to the bottom" about exploited garment workers in Bangladesh was shown. In the film from 2002 the late Neil Kearney from Donegal, General Secretary of the International Textile Garments Leather Workers Federation, was one of the main speakers. His Italian colleague Silvana Cappuccio paid a tribute to him in her contribution; "Neil was close to the most vulnerable workers, the people who need to make their voice heard, those who are neglected by this cynical society and lead by those who are the strongest players". Silvana quoted Neil Kearney saying; "The most common problem among garment workers in the global south is malnutrition. Let us be clear: No one should be paid so little that they can't afford to feed themselves".



Jorge Gamboa at the SIPTU head office's
Jim Larkin picture.

Jorge Gamboa, Colombian trade union leader: *Your solidarity gives us strength*

The importance of the Irish trade union movements' solidarity work with Colombia was highlighted by Jorge Gamboa during his visit to Ireland 25 – 30 May.

"I can not enough emphasise how much the international trade union solidarity means to us. We are working under very difficult circumstances and the knowledge that people in other countries are waging solidarity campaigns for our movement, gives us strength to continue our struggle."

Jorge Gamboa, who is a member of the Executive Committee of the Colombian trade union confederation CUT, spoke at public meetings in Dublin and Galway. He also met with Irish trade union leaders, politicians and NGO representatives. In 2008, whilst in his role as leader of the Colombian Oil Workers Trade Union; Jorge Gamboa led a national campaign against the privatisation of the Colombian State Oil Company. During this campaign he survived an attempt on his life by a group of police officers and like many other trade union leaders has since had to resort to travelling with bodyguards in Colombia.

"I know that I risk my life by being an active trade unionist, but there is no alternative if we want to change life for the better in Colombia. I want my two sons to live in a future Colombia which is built on peace and justice. The only way to realise that goal is to mobilise people for workers' rights and social justice", said Jorge Gamboa. He also emphasised the work against the proposed EU free trade agreement with Colombia.

"A free trade agreement should not be accepted as long as trade unionists are imprisoned, tortured and killed in Colombia. The European Union should put human rights ahead of commercial interests. I hope all politicians who respect human rights can support this demand."

Jorge Gamboa, who visited Ireland for the first time, especially enjoyed the politically interesting bilateral meeting with ICTU President Jack O'Connor. Jorge also found "the public meeting in the beautiful city of Galway very inspiring." The visit to Ireland was organised by ICTU Global Solidarity and the Irish branch of Justice For Colombia.



Burma meeting: June Sorensen ITUC
Photo: John Chaney

Building Solidarity with Burmese workers

On the 25th of March ICTU Global Solidarity and Burma Action Ireland co-organised a solidarity meeting with the Trade Unions in Burma. June Sorensen, of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), informed the meeting about the extreme oppression of workers in Burma, one of the last countries in world where state institutions impose forced labour on the population. Despite the risk of torture and imprisonment, trade unionists operate underground to organise the workers. Recently thousands of garment workers came out on strike to demand a wage increase of \$10 a month. The response by the government has been hard repression. The Federation of Trade Unions Burma (FTUB) held its first Congress in March 2009 in the border area in Thailand. It is vital to strengthen the capacity of FTUB's underground trade union work. That is why ITUC recently established an international solidarity fund for Burma. At the meeting representatives of IMPACT and PSEU made presentations of €10,000 each to the FTUB fund, which will be used for trade union education and organising inside Burma.

Congress protests against Iran

In a letter of 17th February to the Iranian Ambassador in Dublin the General Secretary David Begg protested against Iran denying its labour force the most basic rights. He wrote that "the Iranian government has targeted independent unions for repression and many of their leaders are now in prison. Strikes and labour demonstrations are not tolerated and workers are effectively deprived of representation. Arrests, intimidation and legal persecution are common." On the 9th of May Iran executed trade unionist Farzad Kamangar and four other people. In a new letter to the Iranian Ambassador, David Begg condemned the court process which did not meet international or Iranian standards for a fair trial. He also declared Congress' solidarity with the Iranian trade union movement and full support for their basic demands: abolishment of executions, immediate and unconditional release of labour and all other social movements activists from jails, immediate and unconditional freedom to form trade unions.

Strong Trade Union Solidarity with Palestine



Jack O'Connor and Avital Shapira, Histadrut. Photo: John Chaney



Omar Barghouti, Director of the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions Committee. Photo: John Chaney



Raed Sadeq, Democracy and Workers' Rights Centre. Photo: John Chaney

More than 150 trade union delegates and observers attended ICTU's Middle East Conference "The way forward for Trade Union Solidarity" in St Patrick's Hall, Dublin Castle on Friday the 16th of April.

The aim of the conference was twofold: to build support for Congress' policy on the Middle East and to learn from other trade union actions around the world; to strengthen relationships with the labour movements in the Middle East and beyond and to assist discussion about how union solidarity can contribute to a peaceful solution that respects all UN resolutions.

The Conference was chaired by Congress President, Jack O'Connor. He said that he would be very concerned if Congress' stance was interpreted as being motivated by "hostility to the people of Israel". Instead, he argued, it was motivated by "a sense of obligation given our history and our experience . . . an obligation to try to do something when the prospects for justice seem so remote given the imbalance of forces in the conflict".

The conference was opened by the Minister for Foreign Affairs Micheal Martin. In his speech Minister Martin criticised Israel and the current situation in East Jerusalem, saying that "Israel's expansion of settlements, and the reprehensible policy of demolition and forced eviction of Palestinian families from their homes, has only succeeded in greatly complicating the search for peace." But the Minister also told the conference that the Government does not agree with or support any form of boycott of Israel.

Important speakers from the region were Omar Barghouti, Palestinian National Committee for BDS and Raed Sadeq, Democracy and Workers' Rights Centre in Palestine (DWRC). Both of them emphasised the need for an international boycott against Israel as a way to find a peaceful solution. Omar Barghouti saw the boycott as a "moral obligation and political imperative". He noted that the campaign was gaining momentum internationally and he praised Congress' efforts.

A lively debate followed a speech by Avital Shapira-Shabirow, Director of International Department, Histadrut (the General Federation of Labour in Israel). She accused Congress of bias against Israel. She also claimed that the boycott campaign could damage the prospect for a negotiated solution to the conflict. Several speakers challenged Avital Shapira and claimed that Histadrut had not only failed to condemn the attack on Gaza in early 2009 in which 1400 people, including 300 children, were killed by Israeli forces but had actively defended it.

Concluding the sometimes heated discussion, Jack O'Connor said that it was not sufficient for trade unionists and progressive people to ignore the plight of the Palestinian people just as they should never have ignored the Holocaust in the mid 20th Century.

"Israel's expansion of settlements, and the reprehensible policy of demolition and forced eviction of Palestinian families from their homes, has only succeeded in greatly complicating the search for peace"
Micheál Martin,
Minister for Foreign Affairs

ICTU Women's Conference: Mobilise against sex trafficking

Thanks to a motion tabled by TEEU at the ICTU Womens Conference 5-6 March 2010 the issue of trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation was debated.

Monica O'Connor, co-author of the "Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation" Report for Immigrant Council of Ireland, was invited as a speaker. She told the conference that more than 800,000 people are trafficked across national borders every year. 80% of the victims of trafficking are women and girls, 50% are minors. The majority are trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation. The original environment for trafficking is extreme poverty, war and violence and childhood sexual abuse. Monica O'Connor had interviewed 102 women working in prostitution in Ireland. Her research shows that the vast majority of them came from impoverished regions in Africa and Eastern European non-EU countries. Most of the women had been lured into leaving their country by coercion and deception, often promised jobs in restaurants or with families.

It is estimated that up to 1,000 women are involved in indoor prostitution on any given day in Ireland, and up to 97 percent of these women are migrants. Sex trafficking is lucrative for the traffickers and pimps, but extremely damaging for the women who live in constant fear and anxiety. Most of them have faced violence from pimps and customers and their experience is hugely psychologically damaging.

Monica O'Connor said that the best way to fight against trafficking is to adopt the same legislation as already exists in Sweden, Norway and Iceland: criminalising the buying of sex and decriminalising the selling of sex. The main objective is not to punish men who buy sex, but by law define a norm that promotes gender equality and stops

trafficking by diminishing demand. In Sweden where the law was adopted 1999 the popular support for this law has increased. It has today the majority support of both genders and all age groups of society. It is also interesting to note that sex trafficking to Sweden is very low compared to the neighbouring countries of Denmark and Finland, where there is no legislation against the buying of sex.

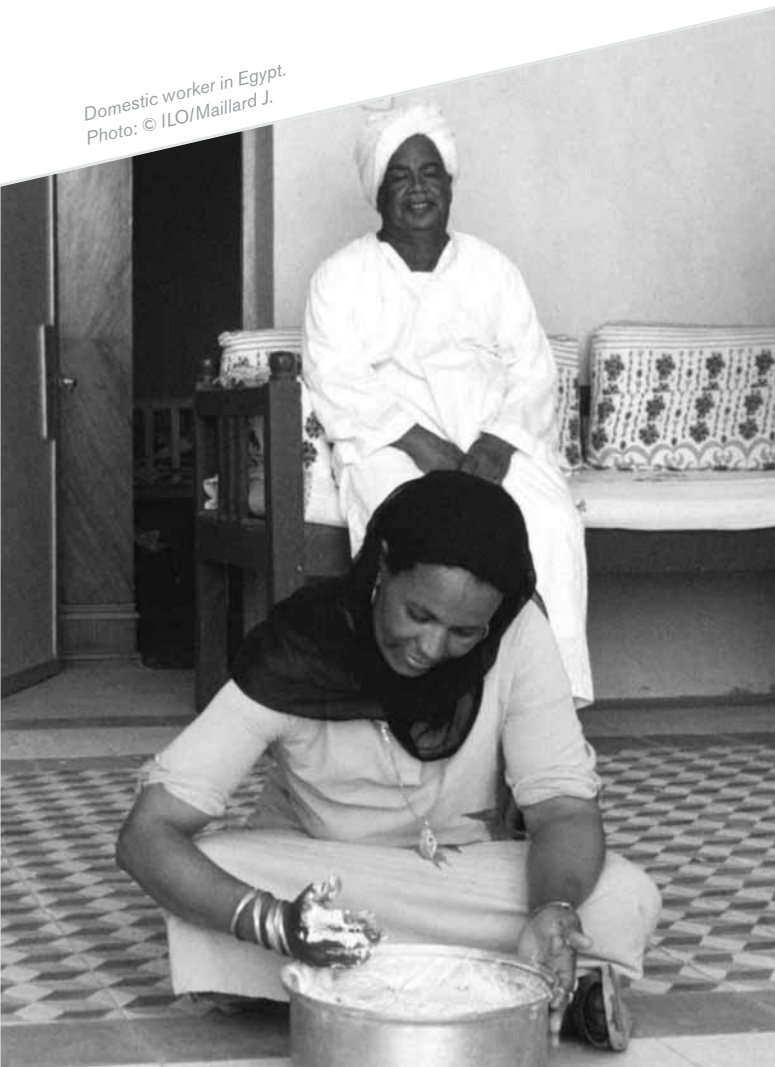
Monica O'Connors presentation was highly appreciated and in the following debate Jessica Irani TEEU who spoke in favour of her unions motion said that "sex trafficking is a modern form of slavery. It is an horrendous crime that has frequently been overlooked in Ireland. The Irish sex industry is worth €180 million a year – women and girls are being exploited for profit. It is an industry that severely harms women and is a tangible form of human rights abuse. We must view prostitution for what it is – a harmful and degrading experience for those involved, rather than a harmless commercial transaction."

The motion was unanimously adopted by the Conference and it called on Congress to join the National Campaign to tackle the demand for paid sex in Ireland, initiated by the Immigrant Council of Ireland and the National Women Council of Ireland.



Jessica Irani, TEEU.
Photo: Lukaz Paluch

Domestic worker in Egypt.
Photo: © ILO/Maillard J.



First round victory in ILO fight for domestic workers

Domestic workers fighting for rights and recognition through binding international standards won a crucial first round victory at this year's International Labour Conference at the ILO in Geneva. On the 4th of June 61 governments voted in favour of a Convention supplemented by a Recommendation, against 14 voting for a Recommendation only. The Convention can hopefully be adopted at the next year's Conference.

This first victory for the hundreds of millions of domestic workers around the world was followed by ten days of tough negotiations around proposed amendments, particularly from the Employers' Group seeking to considerably weaken the scope and content of future standards. While claiming to recognize the important economic contribution of domestic workers, the employers characteristically argued that high standards would reduce employment opportunities for this group of workers – a contention challenged by government representatives from countries including Brazil, Uruguay, and South Africa, where domestic workers are covered under national legislation and collective agreements exist.

Workers' Group spokesperson Halimah Jacob in her introductory remarks told the ILO tripartite Committee on Domestic Workers that their historic task was to take "decent work for all" from a slogan to a reality for all domestic workers.

The Guest Contributor

Claire Courteille

Poverty has a woman's face

In this column the Global Solidarity Newsletter publishes interesting and thought provoking articles written by various international trade unionists. Our third guest contributor;

Claire Courteille is a French citizen and has worked in the Dutch trade union movement (FNV) for many years. She is now the Director of the Equality Department in the International Trade Union Confederation. Claire Courteille writes about gender discrimination in the new globalised labour market. She emphasizes that the fight for gender justice requires addressing the issue of job precariousness

Evidence abounds about the fact that women make up the majority of the world's poor. The increased numbers of women in the labour force over the last decades had not changed the statistics: women continue to bear disproportionate burden and women in the South are the poorest of the poor.

The root causes of women's poverty are various and may differ from one country to the other. An important cause, though, is discrimination in the labour market. Occupations continue to be gender-specific, and female-dominated positions tend to be characterised by an inferior status, lower pay and poorer working conditions.

Gender inequalities in the labour market are often more pronounced in the South and they explain to a large extent why women are overrepresented in the informal economy, in subsistence agriculture, in domestic work or in sweatshops. According to the ILO about two-thirds of the female workforce of the developing world, outside agriculture, is active in the informal economy, with the figure reaching 84% in sub-Saharan Africa.

Women working out of poverty

Despite higher levels of poverty, the overwhelming majority of women in the South do work, often very hard and very long hours. But the conditions to lift them and their families out of poverty are not met. Overall they are overrepresented among the working poor and their potential remains largely under utilized.

In many countries, employment policies continue to be gender insensitive while international development policies have not yet made the essential connection between poverty eradication and employment creation for women. Clearly, more needs to be done both at national and international levels to increase women's access to decent work opportunities.

Although women in the South have currently more income-earning opportunities than ever before, their employment situation remains precarious, unprotected and insecure, bringing little benefit. This was reflected in the ILO Employment Report of this year which said that in general, "the circumstances of female employment – the sectors where women work, the types of work they do, the relationship of women to the job, the wages they receive – bring fewer gains to women than are brought to the typical working male."

The impact of the global crisis on women

The employment impact of the current global crisis is devastating for both men and women. The ILO calculated that worldwide there are 34 million more unemployed in 2009 compared to 2007. Although industrialised countries seem to have been the most hit up to now, the social impact of the crisis is likely to expand to all parts of the world in the coming years.

In the South, women working in export-led factories have taken a great hit. The impact on informal employment – where most women are active – is by definition difficult to assess. If developing countries decide to implement fiscal adjustments and austerity plans, their impact would be particularly damaging for women and girls who are the biggest beneficiaries of public services and welfare provisions.

The crisis is expected to further increase the precariousness of employment. The ILO estimates that increases in vulnerable jobs and working poverty are likely to affect an even larger number of workers than those who will directly lose their employment as a result of the crisis. On current ILO estimates, the number of women and men in vulnerable employment is believed to have increased in 2009, by as much as 110 million compared to 2008.

Addressing the issue of women's precarious employment

Globalisation has re-organised world production in a way that has increased business' profit and decreased the quality of employment worldwide. The search for flexible, docile and cheap labour in an increasingly competitive global environment has given processes of relocation, sub-contracting and outsourcing, an international form. Multinationals have benefitted from these processes which allowed them to take advantage of abundant supplies of, not only less well paid, but also less organised labour.

The current international organisation of world production has weakened labour standards, eroded the employment relationship and undermined workers' rights all around the globe.

In developing countries, women are usually found in the lower levels of global supply chains or towards the periphery of production systems, precisely where wages and quality of employment are the poorest. They are employed by subcontractors, micro enterprises or even forced to become self-employed working at home. In the current context of global crisis, there is a risk that women's employment options will increasingly be limited to unregulated, unprotected, or temporary jobs with no or limited rights to social security, maternity protection, pensions and other benefits.

Two sectors are illustrative of the gender dimension of casual employment, the first one is the garment industry and the second is domestic work.

The garment industry

This industry is dominated by a female workforce. Wages are low – in several developing countries, they don't even reach the 1 dollar a day UN threshold for absolute poverty – and working hours are long.

Yet the fashion and sport goods industries are among the most lucrative. They are controlled by multibillion retail and merchandising giants, the most successful of them making up to 240 billion dollars in sales annually paying their CEOs 8.8 million dollars a year in compensation.

In most cases these companies do not own their own production facilities and do not employ workers. They subcontract the production out to a range of suppliers in low-wage countries - a practice which gives them tremendous flexibility without having to bear the responsibility for the workers who produce the source of their wealth. The combination of absolute control over the suppliers without responsibility towards the workforce creates a system in which profit making companies can dictate their price. As a result wages are squeezed and opportunities for bargaining limited.

The ITGLWF, the International Textile, Garment, Leather Workers' Federation is operating in this environment. It has openly denounced the situation of women home workers, certainly the most flexible form of employment. Home workers are commonly

paid less than the minimum wage, have no access to social security or maternity protection and are denied job security. In many countries they are not even acknowledged as workers with no right to form or join a trade union.

Domestic workers

Another sector in which casual and unregulated employment is the rule is domestic work. Virtually all women active in this sector have a precarious job situation therefore a precarious life.

Domestic work has historically been and continues to be carried out by women. It is perceived as an unskilled job that "any women can do". As a result it is undervalued, and underpaid. In many countries, especially in the South, domestic workers are not covered by labour laws and have no access to social protection. Their workers' rights are massively violated and they are often not allowed to join or form a trade union.

Domestic workers are one of the most, if not the most, exploited category of workers. It is an "invisible" category as their work is carried out in the sphere of private households. This situation renders them particularly vulnerable to harassment and violence. Yet in practice very few are actually able to sue their employers.

But let me end on a positive note: following a strong lobby of trade unions and domestic workers' organizations, last year, the ILO took the historical decision to adopt an international Convention on decent work for domestic workers. The content of this instrument is being negotiated by employers, workers and governments. The ITUC and its affiliates, in close cooperation with their Global Union partners, are working hard to ensure the best outcome of these negotiations scheduled to conclude next June. Domestic work is also the focus of the ITUC Decent Work, Decent Life for Women's campaign whose objective is to encourage domestic workers to form and join trade unions.

By acting together we can make a difference for these millions of women working in the shadows!

In summary

- Female dominated positions tend to be characterized by inferior status, lower pay and poorer working conditions
- Globalisation has so far increased business' profit and decreased the quality of employment worldwide

- Garment industry and domestic work are two areas where women very often are extremely exploited
- ILO decided in June 2010 to adopt a convention on decent work for domestic workers
- ITUC is leading the campaign "Decent Work - Decent Life for Women"

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