

ILC International Newsletter

A dossier of weekly information edited by the International Liaison Committee of Workers and Peoples

INTRODUCTION:

In last week's issue we published the final address, signatures and decisions taken at the Berlin Conference on February 25 and 26.

The creation of a *"European Liaison Committee of Workers and Peoples"* was also announced. We had told our readers that we would publish the debates and decisions taken at the Conference.

This week we publish excerpts from the three introductory reports as well as correspondence from one of the participants.

A participant at the conference from Italy notes that in view of the municipal elections in May, they have put together an electoral slate in Turin: *"We have decided to present this slate to open the debate throughout the country, to clearly express what was said in Berlin: "The free union of sovereign nations and peoples of Europe can only happen through a break with the European Union." Our list is named: "Democracy and public services, Unity of the Republic, NO to the European Union."*

From the United States we have two interviews with leaders of the Million March Movement and the International Longshore Workers Union -- Clarence Thomas and Gabriel Pawl -- who said: *"We assembled on December 8 in Jackson, Mississippi, for a two-day National State of Emergency Conference, which was called by leaders of more than 50 Black organizations and unions, to bring solidarity to the survivors of Hurricane Katrina."*

They stated, further: *"We also organized a Labor Forum in Jackson to discuss what we as Labor should do in solidarity the Katrina survivors."*

An editorial in *Fraternité*, the organ of the Workers Party of Algeria, explains: *"What about Algeria – a nation targeted for military-police tutelage by the U.S. administration, which wants to 'protect' the pillaging of our natural resources by its country's multinationals? Here, the affair of the cartoons coincided with the publication of the IMF Report on Algeria for 2005. ... The IMF wants the law on denationalization to become operative."*

The PT is preparing a meeting for the renationalization of hydrocarbons (oil and gas) and an end to privatisations. It announced: *"The delegates of the more than 500,000 signatories to the oath of February 24, 2005 will meet in order to redeploy and increase the campaign to call for a popular referendum for the defense of national sovereignty."*

A meeting for labor rights was held in New Delhi, India on March 5 and 6. Tafazzul Hussein, president of the national federation of workers in Bangladesh (BJSF), was present. We interviewed him: *"We cannot count on the exploiters, but on the action of our organizations that must preserve their independence. The workers of India, of Bangladesh and Pakistan have the Chinese workers as their necessary and essential allies."*

From Bolivia we have information on the resistance to privatisation of the El Mutun mine: *"The Bolivian trade union (COB) announced it would wage a relentless struggle to prevent the privatization/pillage of El Mutun. It is after the COB took this stance that the government was compelled to postpone its privatization decision."*

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Thousands March on New Orleans to Demand the Right to Return

[Note: Clarence Thomas, executive board member of ILWU Local 10 in the San Francisco Bay Area, and Gabriel Prawl, a past executive board member of ILWU Local 19 in Seattle, are both leaders of the Million Worker March Movement (MWMM).

They were interviewed by Unity & Independence co-editor Alan Benjamin in mid-January.]

Question: Both of you were part of the Million Worker March Movement delegation that travelled to Jackson, Mississippi, and then to New Orleans last December to demand justice for the Katrina survivors. Tell us about these events?

Clarence Thomas: We assembled on **December 8 in Jackson for a two-day National State of Emergency Conference, which was called by leaders of more than 50 Black organizations and unions** to bring our solidarity to the survivors. We were also there to support their action plan, based on their insistence that control and direction of Gulf Coast reconstruction must be placed in their hands. They must be able to exercise their right to self-determination.

Survivors have raised for immediate jobs at union wages, education, housing, clothing and food. They demand reparations for the government's criminal indifference and negligence, estimating that up to \$50 billion belong to the victims and should be paid through a Victims' Compensation Fund, as was done after 9/11 in New York City.

They demand the opportunity to exercise the right to return to the Gulf Coast with dignity and without poverty – so that all families can be reunited. They also demand a complete investigation into, and prosecution of, all government agencies for crimes against humanity.

It was a very significant gathering with a wide diversity of participants. More than 1,000 people were in attendance. There were nationalists, members of the Nation of Islam, socialists, youth, Blacks, whites, seniors, labor organizations – you name it. **It was a big step forward forging a powerful united front.**

We also **organized a specific Labor Forum in Jackson to discuss what we as Labor** should do in solidarity with the Katrina survivors. There were unionists from New York, Seattle, Los Angeles, Buffalo, Baltimore, San Francisco, and many other cities. They were members of AFSCME, Carpenters, SEIU, USLAW, Teamsters, Laborers, Black Workers For Justice, CBTU, among others.

I gave a report to the Labor Forum on the work of the Million Worker March Movement and why we participated in the recent Millions More March in D.C. This report was very well received.

What impressed me the most about the weekend was that the survivors were front and center. This is key. They are the ones who have been shunned by the reconstruction authorities. They are the ones being repressed to this day by the police for standing up for their rights.

Gabriel Prawl: We sent an important delegation from Seattle to the Gulf Coast that included members of ILWU Local 19, ILWU Local 52, Teamsters Local 174, IBEW Local 46 and LELO. At the initiative of the Million Worker March Movement's Seattle Committee and the African American Longshore Coalition of the ILWU we started a Katrina Relief Committee in Seattle, following the example of ILWU Local 10 in San Francisco, which immediately organized to send material aid to the survivors and their families – particularly those who are returning.

We've secured a warehouse from the Port of Seattle to house all the material aid we are going to be sending to New Orleans. The King County Central Labor Council has endorsed this effort. Our goal is to fill 10 containers, to be sent by train to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. We think we have a good shot at filling 10 containers. We are working closely on this effort with ILA Local 3033 in New Orleans. They are providing a warehouse for the containers.

Question: Your delegation then caravaned from Jackson to New Orleans. Tell us about the situation in New Orleans?

Clarence Thomas: Things are not good. New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, together with the real-estate developers, has tried to bulldoze people's homes, particularly in the 9th Ward – a Black, working class district. The residents were not contacted, let alone consulted, about this planned demolition.

Community members seek to halt the demolition of homes until they have had the opportunity to evaluate their properties

and make decisions about how to proceed. Many owners remained stranded in other cities. The Community Labor United (CLU) went to court and was able to secure a temporary stay on the bulldozing.

But the real-estate developers and speculators have not given up. It is a never-ending struggle. But I can say this: There is a strong grassroots movement that is developing, with real empowerment and activity.

Gabriel Prawl: The folks in CLU and other organizations in New Orleans are excited about the labor movement stepping up to the plate. They feel there is hope when they see longshore workers, teamsters and healthcare workers from all over the country supporting their struggle.

More of this needs to be done. Too often, folks in the community see labor as only being concerned with its own self-interests. All they see is business unionism. For them, our presence was a welcome change.

Question: What can unionists and activists do now to support these efforts?

Clarence Thomas: Our Labor Caucus in Jackson is asking the entire labor movement to pass resolutions calling for a moratorium on the evictions of the survivors. We also need unions at all levels to organize material aid, as we have begun to do in ILWU.

Our role is to be supporters and to insist that the survivors be the ones who have the say in how their communities will be rebuilt.

Gabriel Prawl: On December 21, we held a press conference and rally in Seattle to build support for the People's Hurricane Relief Fund (PHRF). We brought two important speakers from New Orleans to address our events: Curtis Muhammad, a leader of Community Labor United and PHRF, and Mama Dee, a local community organizer in New Orleans' 7th Ward.

Unionists and activists in cities across the country could organize similar events to build citywide support groups for the survivors.

Berlin European Conference 25th & 26th February 2006

[Note: More than 200 delegates from 15 countries met in Berlin on February 25 and 26 for a European Conference at the initiative of German worker trade unionists and the ILC. Forty-one delegates took part in the discussion. All the facts presented demonstrated and verified the barrage organized by the European Union that “is destroying the industrial and agricultural bases in our countries, undermining the foundations of sovereignty of our nations, thereby representing the most serious threat to all countries on our continent,” as the final address signed by the delegates indicates. In conclusion, the final address states that “the objective is to form a European Liaison Committee of Workers and Peoples.”]

We will be publishing the complete speeches at the European Conference in Berlin in the first European Bulletin.

In this issue we publish excerpts from the introductory reports as well as a brief report from a participant at the Conference.

In ILC International Newsletter No. 172 we published the final address with the signatures, the participating countries and the decisions taken.

The European Liaison Committee of Workers and Peoples

The discussion at the conference centered on an essential question. The European Liaison Committee of Workers and Peoples unites activists and organizations involved in the labor and democratic movements, elected officials, democrats from all European countries. It is not in competition with any existing organization on a national or international plane. Each has its own affiliations, its own commitments and all must be respected. The Liaison Committee is founded on an address that poses these five principles:

- . The need to reconquer political and social democracy
- . The need for independence of labor organizations vis-à-vis the states, the governments, the bosses and continental and international institutions.
- . It is founded on the principle of defense of all conquests, labor, democratic and social, in the manner that they have been obtained by the history of the labor and democratic movements in each country.
- . It is founded on the need to break with the European Union its institutions and treaties.
- . It is founded with the objective of assisting in the realization of the widest unity of workers and their organization with the perspective of the free union of peoples and free nations throughout Europe.

Excerpts from three introductory reports to the conference

Gotthard Krupp
(Germany)

“Sixteen years after the fall of the Wall.”

“Sixteen years after the fall of the Wall and the uprising of the reunited people, Berlin has fallen into social ruin,” declared Gotthard Krupp, a director of the Labor Commission of the SPD and the Ver.di of Berlin in his introduction to the conference.

Who remembers the attempts to introduce social equality throughout Germany? 300,000 jobs were liquidated in Berlin following the structural adjustment plans dictated by the European Union.

The European Union banned the subsidies that helped save companies. Following the privatization of the state electric company that benefited Samsung in 1990, there are now only 800 employees remaining of the 8,000 there were in 1989. Management now wants to relocate in Hungary. “Opening the East” puts pressure on wages. Our worker colleagues do not want to oppose the workers in Eastern Europe.

Social conquests have been destroyed in the Lander and in Eastern Germany. The Berlin regional government is a government of the SPD-PDS. The ex-nomenklatura played a decisive role in this situation. Communal property was totally destroyed in the east. With the Grand Coalition, the wave of privatization will accelerate. It is the destruction of national collective bargaining conventions.

At present there is a strike of public services throughout the Lander. The strike is against the destruction of collective bargaining conventions unique throughout Germany for all public services. This is directly linked to the European Union.

Jacim Milunovic
(former Yugoslavia)

“The European Union is the Balkanization of all Europe”

“All the workers of Europe are faced

with the same problems: destruction of their countries, regimes subordinated to the European Union,” agreed Jacim Milunovic, member of the executive committee of the Independence trade union.

After the revolutionary wave that followed WWII, the people gained important conquests. The Yugoslavian Federation emerged. But the aspirations of the peoples to a free union of the Balkans were not accomplished. Later, against the ‘reforms’ by the bureaucracy under the yoke of the IMF, the people of Yugoslavia resisted by going on strike. That is when the bureaucracy launched a war against the peoples.

Yugoslavia was chopped up into five entities directed by puppet governments under the control of NATO. Kosovo was under military occupation. The complete destruction included even the name of Yugoslavia.

Today the European Union is preparing the separation of Montenegro, and Kosovo and dictates the activities of the Balkan governments.

Privatizations are increasing, the

liquidation of national sovereignty in on the move. The situation worsens daily, with a surge of poverty and unemployment, and the development of an underground economy.

The governments of the Balkans exist only thanks to the support of the European Union, which wants to complete the privatizations in order to get rid of all social conquests.

The objective of the European Union is the Balkanization of all Europe.

The Yugoslav Federation is a lost conquest. We favor the reconstitution of a free Yugoslavia, in a democratic federation of the peoples of Europe.

Daniel Gluckstein
(France)

“For the free union of peoples and free nations of Europe”

“Can we preserve democracy, social rights, peace without breaking with the European Union?” asks Daniel Gluckstein, national secretary of the Workers Party and coordinator of the International Liaison Committee of Workers and Peoples, the third presenter at this conference.

It is the European Union that atomizes the Balkans. Privatizations, wars, and communitarianism: the European Union is a machine that chops up the flesh of nations.

It was suggested to us to build a European Liaison Committee of Workers and Peoples. Why?

The debate is not for or against

Europe but rather against the European Union. We counterpose to their destructive scheme the call for **free union of peoples and the free nations of Europe.**

On May 29 in France, all the great institutional parties called for the YES. The people said: *“This must stop!”*

Today the situation is dramatic. All measures taken come from the European Union without exception. Is there a ‘social’ way to re-orient the European Union? All the governments that have governed within the framework of Maastricht have held the same policies.

The “grand coalition” policy in Germany is becoming generalized: in Italy with Prodi, in France between the government of the right and the regions of “the left.”

A report from one of the participants:

The situation is the same in every country in Europe. An example: the public-private partnerships (PPP).

Gerlinde Schermer, a German delegate, indicated how in her commune the financing of public equipment was in the hands of a private company through a bank, at a price designed to bankrupt the commune.

In France the partnership was announced between the Paris public assistance, the Dexia insurance company and the Deutsche Bank. In both cases, the private investors demand a “return on their investment” that will lead to the bankruptcy of hospitals as well as communes.

What is the source? The European Union and its policy of private-public partnerships for the financing of public infrastructures as codified in the Green Book of April 30, 2004. What is true about the PPP is true in all domains. Faced with this policy the

labor movement confronts difficulties.

A discussion with the ETUC took place. Could we say that the ETUC’s call to demonstrate in Strasburg on February 14 was designed to oppose the European directives or perhaps the Bolkenstein directive? No. The ETUC worked on the proposed European Constitution. It cooperates in authoring the European directives. When it calls for a demonstration in Strasburg it indicates: *“It is to reach an agreement on which we can all be in agreement concerning the directive on services.”*

What is true is that the ETUC does not represent national trade unions as several delegates have indicated. Despite obstacles, the national trade union organizations have not been destroyed as organizations. The workers endeavor to take over their organizations to defend themselves as a working class. They do this despite the policy of their leaders,

as we saw in Belgium where the movement undertook a major struggle in defense of retirement programs. We see it in France in the movement for interprofessional strikes on March 7. We see it in Germany in the strike of public servants. The delegates from these countries have so indicated.

Several speakers noted the fight carried on in Germany against the reform of federalism that has broken up the federal republic. They indicated that the fight for the preservation of social unity in Germany is the order of the day.

This led Daniel Gluckstein to insist on his reply on this point: *“What is true for Germany is true for Italy, for Great Britain, and for France. In different forms, each of our countries has seen the working class conquer rights. Today those rights are threatened. It is the manner in which they have been secured that one must defend and*

reconquer them.”

Yugoslavia had permitted the southern Balkan nations a harmonious manner of coexistence and up to that time were not supposed to confront each other until the breakup of Yugoslavia, when they were again thrown into war and confrontation.

Isn’t that one of the essential reasons for the formation of a European Liaison Committee of Workers and Peoples? Throughout the European Union nations are being dismembered and divided.

By signing the address to workers and peoples of Europe (*see ILC Newsletter No. 172*) for the creation of a European Liaison Committee of Workers and Peoples, the delegates said:

The issue is the free union of peoples and free nations of Europe – free from the yoke of the European Union.

A contribution by Lorenzo Varaldo, delegate to the Berlin conference where he presented an electoral slate for the municipal elections in Turin. “Our slate will be titled ‘Democracy and public services, Unity of the republic and NO to the European Union.’”

I participated in the Berlin conference along with other Italian delegates representing the “national committee for the NO to the European Union, for the defense of the unity of the Italian Republic” and I noted several speeches that pointed out the consequences of the policy of the European Union, the problem of ‘federalism’, regionalization and the division of nations.

In Italy we are directly affected by this question. The present government of the right of Berlusconi has voted a ‘reform’ of the Constitution called ‘devolution’ that opens the door to the division of our country into 20 ‘little Italies’. With this ‘reform’ the 20 Italian regions would have absolute power as regards education, health, police and the tax system. This ‘reform’ that was passed by Parliament, must be submitted to a referendum to become effective, which will probably be held next June.

But what will happen at the next elections on April 9, when the Unione, directed by Prodi, former president of the European Commission will oppose Berlusconi?

The program published by Unione foresees: regional senates, the suppression of the chambers of parliament, fiscal federalism, total regionalization of the labor market and the completion of the ‘federalist’ reform that the center-left government, led by Prodi over two and a half years, has adopted.

It is not surprising: Prodi has openly declared that this program has at its center the application of the policy of the European Union, which he has directed for over five years and during which he has dictated to Berlusconi all the destructive plans.

Our national committee at a meeting on February 4 decided to present a slate in Turin on the occasion of the next municipal elections that will be held in May, a month after the general elections. Our list is titled: “Democracy and public services, Unity of the republic and NO to the European Union.”

As our appeal indicates in the call for this initiative, we do not want to remain enclosed between the right of Berlusconi and the Unione of Prodi, who has indicated he will follow the same policy. We decided to present this list in order to open a debate throughout the country to clearly state, as it was said in Berlin, “the free union of sovereign nations of Europe cannot happen without a break with the European Union.”

This list will be equally composed of candidates from other Italian towns, since the problems we encounter concern the entire country, all the workers and all the population.

But as one worker said at our assembly on March 2, “in reality those or not just Turin’s problems, nor just those of Italy, those are questions that concern all countries.”

It is in this sense that our slate is linked to the fight of all the peoples as we have seen in Berlin, a moment of confrontation of experiences and first fundamental initiative.

We consider the decision to create a European Liaison Committee of Workers and Peoples fundamental, as it constitutes a step towards a break with the European Union. We are ready to widen and follow the debate initiated in Berlin

-- Lorenzo Varaldo

Interview with Prodi in La Repubblica (February 27, 2006) concerning the fusion of GDF-Suez.

About the role of Mario Monti, former European commissioner on competition who was a part of the Brussels Commission along with Prodi between 2000 and 2005, Prodi replied:

“We dismantled the German system of banks in the Lander, placed strict limits on the asymmetrical expansion of the EDF abroad, blocked state aid to France Telecom, imposed rules to rescue French Alstom.”

In other words, Prodi confirms that he has privatized and dismantled the public monopolies in applying the Maastricht Treaty that imposes a “free and unfettered” market .

When questioned, “Are you accusing the

Berlusconi government, even if it was the center-left that liberalized energy? He replied: “As if what I have done is not enough. The liberalization started in 2000 was necessary.”

Today Prodi is at the head of the slate of a coalition named Unione made up of a dozen different parties from the right to the extreme left, including the Party of Communist Refoundation, for the elections next April 9 and 10.

Unione’s secretary general, Fausto Bertinotti, once president of the European Left Party, declared to La Repubblica (February 27, 2006): “ We are and will be faithful to Prodi. There won’t be another 1998.” [That year the deputies of the Party of Communist

Refoundation did not vote for Prodi, who was forced to step down.]

What do F. Turigliatto and S. Cannavo of Sinistra Critica newspaper say under these conditions? Both are members of the leadership of the Party of Communist Refoundation -- a political equivalent in France where the LCR of Krivine and Besancenot have now joined the Committee for Left Unity with the French Communist Party”). They say: “The Party of Communist Refoundation must follow the road of an electoral agreement in order to fight the right.” They consider that the electoral campaign of the Communist Party must develop on the base of its own program on the positive parts that the Unione program contains.”

“For the Renationalization of the Hydrocarbons” (Editorial in No. 59 of *Fraternite*, February 2006, publication of the Workers Party of Algeria)

Four months after their publication on September 30, 2005, the provocative Danish cartoons have, in fact, provoked violent demonstrations in Islamic countries.

The millions of demonstrators had good reason to protest since they come from a region that has been under specific and sustained attack since September 2001. But as with all political provocations that take place in relation to the sensitive issue of religion, one has the duty to ask the following question: Who profits from this and what is at stake?

First, by a very strange coincidence, this entire provocation came at the precise moment when the AIEA resolution on Iran was being discussed and adopted by the UN Security Council, thus opening the way for military strikes against Iran and increased threats against Syria. The provocation came in the immediate aftermath of the recent developments in Palestine following the victory of Hamas (which only confirms the total impasse to the pseudo-solution of two States). And it took place in a situation where the U.S. and British armies are sinking deeper into the Iraqi quagmire, just as the resistance to the occupation in Afghanistan has increased. This concerns the Middle East.

In the region of the Maghreb in Northern Africa, the visit by Donald Rumsfeld to three countries (Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco) took place with the aim of “reinforcing the cooperation in the fight against terrorism.” But the meaning of the trip must be placed in its proper context: the three countries visited are part of the U.S. government’s Eizenstat Plan.

Indeed, Rumsfeld’s visit was preceded by a visit of top officials of the FBI, which wants to open an agency in our country, and by a visit of top U.S. military and NATO leaders. *L’Expression* of Algiers noted in its February 6, 2006 edition, “In negotiating a possible installation of military bases in southern Algeria, northern Mali and Niger, the North American motivation is not only the fight against Islamic terrorism but the protection of their oil interests, especially in Algeria.”

Shouldn’t we be concerned when we see a U.S. protectorate emerging in our country?

Bush has declared that he “wants to end the United States’ energy dependence on the Gulf States.”

It has been proven that Africa has an abundance of oil. Algeria, moreover, has profitable oil infrastructures – which will be reinforced by an investment of US\$33 billion in the following five years.

Doesn’t the call to boycott Danish products, which quickly extended to other European products, serve the interests of the U.S. multinationals? Bush and Blair claimed they were concerned about this denigration of Islam and went on to condemn it. How cynical can you get?

Forgotten, then, are the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, the daily massacres, the perpetual aggression against the Palestinian people, the threats against Iran and Syria?

Forgotten, then, are the horrors of Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, the torture-interrogations in secret planes and the persecutions in Great Britain and the United States against all the foreigners of Muslim countries?

The Danish cartoonist possibly ignored that he was playing the sorcerer’s apprentice – but his work has been used for the benefit of pyromaniacs claiming to want to put out the fire.

And what about the Arab regimes – which tolerate, even encourage, demonstrations against the cartoons while they firmly repress all demonstrations in solidarity with the Palestinian and Iraqi people?

What about Algeria – a nation targeted for military-police tutelage by the U.S. administration, whose main aim is to ‘protect’ the pillaging by the U.S. multinationals of our natural resources? Here, the affair of the cartoons coincided with the publication of the IMF Report on Algeria for 2005.

Henceforth, according to the IMF, the plan to re-launch oil production must be reserved for foreign investors, the reforms must be accelerated, the banks must be privatized -- and we should no longer count on the hydrocarbons for our growth and development. The law on denationalization must be enforced. Such are the dictates of the IMF.

Following suit, the Algerian government has accepted with zeal the privatization/dissolution of state companies (159 have been announced) and the reimbursement of the foreign debt (US\$10 billion in 2005). It has agreed to lower corporate taxes (thus preparing the liquidation of the CNAS and the CNR). It has agreed to promote non-renewable, short-term labor contracts, to prohibit the exercise of labor rights, and to promote the systematic attack on the right to strike.

In response to the strikes within the public service sector and to the statement by Ouyahia on the need for wage increases, the director general of the IMF opposed this statement, calling any such decision “illegitimate” -- thereby confirming the will of international institutions to dismantle our country; of course, not without their local accomplices.

The workers and the youth do not accept this devastation

In the realm of national education, in the universities, in the hospitals, in the ports and the industrial zone of Rouiba, in the public companies deliberately strangled and marked for privatization, among the pensioners, the veterinarians, everywhere ... the anger increases by the day against the deregulation and fire sale of our industrial patrimony. The students and unemployed graduates repeatedly have demonstrated their outrage. ...

Those who are at the bottom, the great majority, do not want to live in poverty and humiliation; they refuse to see the continued and deepening plunder and dismantling of their nation.

The Workers Party (PT) is preparing a mass meeting for the renationalization of the hydrocarbons (oil and gas), for an end to privatizations, for an end to the foreign plunder of our national energy resources and our financial, economic and human riches.

The delegates of the more than 500,000 signatories to the oath of February 24, 2005, will meet to redeploy and increase the campaign for a Popular Referendum in Defense of National Sovereignty.

The leaders of the FLN have reacted to the statement by Ouyahia, confirming the legitimacy of an increase in wages. The workers can only be in agreement. But isn’t it necessary then to move from the spoken word to action and to urgently call for a plenary session of the National Popular Assembly to debate this pressing question and to decide to increase the nationally guaranteed minimum wage (SNMG)? The FLN has a majority in the National Popular Assembly; a solution to this matter is within reach.

Will A. Belkhadem, who said we are not obliged to apply IMF directives, do so?

And doesn’t the implementation of a “national solution” that preserves the national economy of the Algerian state require the reestablishment of nationalizations by abrogating the villainous and anti-national law of March 20, 2005?

We believe this is a pre-condition.

Louisa Hanoune, February 12, 2006

International Meeting for Labor Rights in Asia (New Delhi, India March 5-6, 2006)

On March 5-6, an International Meeting for Labor Rights in Asia took place in New Delhi, India. The Meeting, held at the initiative of the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI) and the ILC, launched an international campaign in favor of textile workers.

Issue No. 170 of the ILC International Newsletter published the appeal for the March 5-6 conference. In this issue, we publish an interview with Tafazzul Hussein, president of the National Workers Federation of Bangladesh (BJSF), who traveled to New Delhi to attend the International Meeting focused on the rights of the textile workers across Asia.

What is the NTUI?

In India the history and traditions of the labor movement are such that all major political parties are linked to a trade union federation, which they lead. Over the past few years, a whole host of independent labor organizations have arisen; independent in the sense that they don't depend on a political party.

The NTUI is the new coordinating body of these various independent organizations. The NTUI will soon hold its India-wide founding national congress. On the occasion of this congress, the NTUI has called upon the ILC to co-host with the NTUI an international meeting the first day of the congress.

Question: Why, as a leader of a trade union federation, did you travel to New Delhi?

T.H.: The dire situation of the textile workers in Bangladesh should suffice as an explanation.

On February 9, in the outskirts of Dacca, in Gazipur, the Jamuna factory went up in flames and was totally destroyed. This took place at night, when 1,600 people were at work. It is estimated that 20 people died in the fire. Among the 11 the first bodies lifted out from the rubble, seven were women.

On February 23 in Chittagong (the second-largest city in the country and the main port), in the industrial zone of Karlugat, a similar catastrophe took place. A fire devastated the major textile factory. One hundred eleven workers died. The majority of the victims that have been identified, 54 of them to be exact, were women.

And just a few days ago, in Dacca itself, another grave accident took place, where a building housing textile installations, we set afire. Dozens more were killed.

These accidents, with a tragic loss of human lives, are not a coincidence. Ever since the generalized deregulation of the world's textile market was announced, governments and bosses throughout Asia have warned that the only way their textile plants can stay afloat (in our country, 80% of exports are textiles) is to increase "productivity" and "competitiveness." What this means is to lower even more – by any means necessary -- the costs of labor.

The workers who lost their lives in these industrial tragedies were not the victims of accidents. They were assassinated.

They died because the most basic safety guidelines and mechanisms were sacrificed on the altar of "increased competition." They died in the name of what the IMF calls the "competitive advantage of Bangladesh."

Question: Tell us more about the overall context in which these accidents have occurred?

T.H.: The IMF estimates that up to 40% of the estimated 4,000 textile factories will close – even though the costs of labor are exceedingly low. This textile industry is controlled by foreign multinational corporations. The recent "liberalization" of the textile industry worldwide will not treat nations equally. For example, Bangladesh's textiles have always been penalized when it comes to entering the U.S. market. U.S. imperialism is carrying out a veritable blackmail operation when it comes to the sovereignty of our nation. It demands that Bangladesh and its government accept a treaty that would allow it to take over all the textile industry and push aside all competitors – in exchange for which customs duties for entry into the United States of Bangladeshi goods "could" be reduced.

Question: How can this be resisted?

T.H.: Through actions, in each country and on an international scale. Actions and campaigns carried out in defense of labor rights, in defense of collective bargaining agreements, against the "free trade zones" – where the laws of a given country are not applicable – and in defense of a living wage. You should know that today the average wage in the textile industry of Bangladesh is between \$18 and \$20 per month.

To carry out this fight, workers can only

count on themselves and their own independent organizations. We are told about how corporations are expected to abide by "codes of conduct." We are told about "corporate social responsibility." Many companies functioning in our country in the textile industry are said to be such "good corporate citizens" – and yet the working class and our industry continues to be smashed.

We cannot give in to this appeal to finding "common ground" with the exploiters. We can only look to our own organizations for this fight – which is why preserving the independence of our trade unions and labor organizations in the face of this drive to co-opt them is so vital. This is true in Bangladesh. It is true in Asia and the world over.

This question is so important it must be raised on an international scale. This is what we did, in fact, in the joint statement issued by the APTUF trade union federation of Pakistan and our own BJSF federation. Workers throughout Asia have the same interests. They are being attacked by the same liberalization directives. That is why they have to unite.

In this sense, the workers of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan have necessary and essential allies in the Chinese workers.

China is often portrayed as the beneficiary of the deregulation/liberalization of the textile industry. But the truth is that even in China, it's the large multinational corporations that are benefiting from this process. The Chinese workers are suffering in their own flesh from this mad drive to "lower labor costs," just like their counterparts in Bangladesh and the other Asian countries.

Stop the sale and pillage of the El Mutun mine!

The El Mutun mine in Bolivia was going to be privatized. The former government had called for international bids, and five multinationals had applied.

The decision was to be taken on February 21, 2006. But it was postponed for 90 days following the loud and vocal rejection to the privatization/sale by the Bolivian workers and Bolivian people, a rejection fueled by the Bolivian Trade Union Confederation (COB).

The multinationals had pressed for the privatization/sale of this mine, which has the world's second largest reserves of iron and manganese, with 40,000 billion ton of iron ore and 30,000 of manganese. This represents a value of US\$7 billion. The multinationals have offered Bolivia 1% of the extracted minerals – a mere trifle, a brazen sacking of national resources.

At the beginning, the new government of Evo Morales had said the call for bids would take place on the agreed date. In fact, the oligarchy of the region of Santa Cruz had insisted that the agreement must be concluded with the multinationals at the scheduled date. Obviously this oligarchy has nothing to do with the percentage that the multinationals pay the state. Their only interest is the profits they can obtain through a separate agreement with the companies. That is why they defend the present contracts with the oil companies and oppose the nationalization without indemnity of gas and oil.

A measure of “high treason”

On February 15, the general secretary of the COB, Jaime Solares, accused President Evo Morales of committing a “crime of high treason” to the country when he announced that the appeal for private bids for El Mutun would go forward as projected. The trade union leader declared in a press conference that Morales’ appeal for private bids was made under pressure from the local oligarchy in Santa Cruz and further noted that if this sale went ahead, it would imply that foreign corporations would exploit the nation’s resources, leaving just crumbs for Bolivia. The COB leader announced that the union federation would use all means necessary to prevent the sale of El Mutun.

It was after this statement that the government was compelled to postpone its decision.

An open letter to Evo Morales

On February 9, the expanded executive committee of the federation of high school and college students of El Alto added its signature to the open letter addressed to President Evo Morales demanding the nationalization without indemnization of hydrocarbons and the annulment of the “education reform,” among other points. This letter was carried by a delegation of the COB to President Morales on Monday, February 20. A month after Morales took office, nationalization without indemnization of the hydrocarbons remains the unanimous demand of the workers and peasants of all Bolivia.

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