



**Report by UITBB President John Sutton
Executive Committee Meeting, Sao Paulo, Brazil
28 - 29 May 2008**

Comrades

Let me extend a warm welcome to both delegates and visitors to the UITBB's Executive Committee meeting taking place in Sao Paulo, Brazil on 28 and 29 May 2008.

To the participants in this meeting who have travelled from all corners of the globe let me thank you and your national organizations for the efforts made to come to this important meeting.

The UITBB's Executive Committee is the elected body charged with governing our organization between the congresses and is responsible for implementing the decisions of our Congress.

I will shortly explain the work our organization has undertaken in 18 months or so since our 14th Congress in Athens - and it is a good solid record of activity implementing the action plan that we determined in Athens.

But at this point let me now extend hearty, fraternal thanks to our dear comrades from the Furniture Workers' Union of Sao Paulo for the extensive effort and resources they have committed towards hosting this key world event of the UITBB.

Thank you in particular to our comrade Antonio Lopes for his dedicated efforts.

The leadership of the UITBB trusts we will have a rewarding visit to Brazil, the largest country in Latin America at a time of fascinating political and economic change in this part of the world.

Global Political Context

Usually an analysis of global political developments starts with looking at North America or Europe, but my short analysis in this paper starts by looking at **Latin America**. This is because the people's movement against the neo-liberal economic model is at its most developed stage on this continent.

After many decades of being victims of economic imperialism, nation after nation in this part of the world have said enough. US economic prescriptions have done enormous social and economic damage and are now being rejected - instruments of

economic imperialism such as NAFTA and ALCA (FTAA) sponsored by the US and its multinational corporations have generated widespread resistance.

Instead inspired by the longtime heroic efforts of the Cuban people various Latin American nations are now turning to their own material and intellectual resources to fashion agreements between cooperative neighbours, which are designed to maximize local outcomes rather than profits for US or European corporations.

One of the exciting things about our gathering in Brazil at this time is for trade union leaders from construction and wood unions across the globe to learn first hand of the workers movements' reinvigoration and fight-back against capitalist globalization. We all hope to take way valuable lessons that can aid us in our many struggles.

In the capitalist bulwark of the **United States** we today see great disillusionment about the dismal failure of the Bush neo-conservative experiment.

The aggressive foreign policy adventures, which resulted in the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, are now rejected by the American people and Bush's domestic economic policies have seen recession, widespread bankruptcy and unemployment descend on to the American working class. Record oil prices, high interest rates (by historical standards) and a deluge of cheap imported consumer products equate to a troubled period ahead for jobs and living standards in the US.

Against this background the American people go to elections this year with the Republican Party likely to be punished by the US voters.

The **European** political economy is not in the same abject state as the US precisely because the Bush style neo-fascist policies were not rammed through by the European establishment in the same way as cowboy George.

But this does not mean that the unfolding neo-liberal economic and social programme being implemented by the commanding heights of power in Europe is either more palatable to the European public or ultimately likely to be any more successful than it was in the US. In fact the European Union seems to have learned none of the lessons of history and is addicted to the policy of dismantling civil society protections in favour of the capitalist market place determining economic and social outcomes.

But this drive towards market based solutions does not come without setbacks when people's struggle is ignited as it was with the rejection of the neo-liberal EU Constitution by the working class of France and the Netherlands.

But politics in Europe is not clear in its trajectory as victories for workers interests and then setbacks occur in contradictory ways. For instance just as the French learn of the bankruptcy of their neo-liberal president Sarkozy, the Italian people vote to return to the disastrous leadership of the capitalist magnate Berlusconi.

One notable victory for the people's movement in Europe that we should hail is the election of a Communist as President of Cyprus – a great development for working people on that island nation and hopefully a giant step toward a united Cyprus.

In the region of the world from which I come, **Asia** we see rapid economic and social development taking place in a region occupied by nearly half of the world's population.

Sitting alongside unprecedented economic and industrial expansion in countries like China and India, we still see vast numbers of people living in poverty or deprivation. Most Asians still work the land as peasants despite the huge growth in industrial jobs.

As elsewhere the central question of political economy in Asia revolves around who will control and who will benefit from the economic expansion that is underway. Developments in Asia require our close attention and analysis because of the sheer scale of the economic growth, the potential rewards for the people, the impact on jobs and living standards in other parts of the world and the major issue of climate change and global warming.

The rapidly emerging new crisis of escalating food prices and inadequate food production is also acutely felt across Asia – though this phenomenon is by no means limited to Asia.

Africa remains the poorest region on earth ravaged by hundreds of years of European economic imperialism. While former colonies may now have political independence, economic control of the most productive resources and assets all too often is in the hands of multinational corporations.

Africa's problems stretch from widespread poverty, to drought and environmental degradation, through to civil wars and internal strife, and on to the crippling HIV/AIDS epidemic which is taking a savage toll in some African nations. Often corrupt regimes coupled with the counter-productive policies of the World Bank, IMF and WTO have exacerbated the pre-existing deep-seated problems.

The increased interest and investment of the Chinese in Africa in recent years represents a significant development for the continent – hopefully a development which will aid economic and social progress unlike most previous Western interventions.

When looking at the global political economy the significance of the **Middle-East** cannot be overstated. Finding a lasting and equitable solution to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, the internal tensions in Lebanon, western hostility towards Syria and Iran, and the disastrous invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, all represent geo-political issues of great importance.

So much of the US and western aggression towards various Arab countries stems from the strategic decision to use Israel as a proxy for western economic and security interests in this oil rich part of the world. Until the US and its western allies acknowledge and act on the historic injustice visited on the Palestinian people since 1948, there is little hope for a lasting solution to any or all of the inter-related Middle-East conflicts. The UITBB continues to stand with our Palestinian brothers and sisters who have suffered so much, together with our comrades from Lebanon, Syria and the other Arab countries that have faced constant Israeli and US aggression.

The UITBB condemned the illegal and immoral invasion of Iraq when it happened and we continue to call for the western occupiers to withdraw and make reparations for the death and destruction they have brought to the Iraqi people.

Comrades, in sketching a geo-political landscape for our discussion over the next 2 days I apologize if I haven't done justice to your own national political and industrial issues. One thing I don't apologize for is that at all our UITBB meetings we attempt to come to grips with the key political forces that are at work, so that our industrial and trade union discourse is properly grounded. Unlike the other building union international federation BWI, we openly acknowledge the importance of politics and we know that it is impossible to advance workers' struggles without understanding the class nature of capitalism and the class forces that are at work.

UITBB activities since 14th congress

Comrades, I now want to take you through the various activities we have undertaken in accordance with our workplan of our 14th Congress which took place in September 2006.

Asia

- The 5th Regional meeting of construction workers' unions in the Asia-Pacific region took place 22-23 February 2007 in Manila. A broad spectrum of countries and delegates attended. The discussion on the main topic "Migrant Workers" produced excellent papers and contributions; delegates decided to meet again within 18 months time; a resolution to observe a Day of Protest for the protection of guests workers was passed.

This resolution has been implemented: On 28 September 2007, unions in many countries responded to the call launched by the UITBB and organised a series of events (marches, seminars, press statements, etc.) to bring to the attention of public opinion the violations of human and trade union rights of guest workers. This action was supported by leaders of the BWI, who urged their member unions to join in, thus adding to the impact of this international day of action.

The 6th Regional meeting took place 13 - 17 April 2008 in Christchurch, New Zealand, at the invitation of a new affiliate of the UITBB, the New Zealand Building

Trades Union. "Migrant workers" and "asbestos" were among the topics high on the agenda. Among the plans coming out of the meeting it was agreed to hold the 7th Regional meeting in Indonesia in early 2009.

Africa

- The African Coordinating Committee of the UITBB met 24 - 26 September 2007 in Cotonou, Benin, to discuss the situation of building workers on the African continents, to plan future activities and, in particular to finalise a project to be submitted to the ILO regarding training of union officials. Seven unions (six countries) attended.

- African Unions decided to observe on 25 October each year a Day of Action for the implementation of Health and Safety standards.

Latin America

- A Training seminar for building workers of Latin American unions was organised in cooperation with the WFTU regional secretariat for Latin America, with Flemacon and the Cuban Construction Workers' Union in Cuba, 21-29 of September 2007. The General Secretary of the UITBB José Dinis attended as a lecturer.

- The Secretariat participated in the inaugural Congress of the new class based central organisation of trade unions called CTB in Brazil, during December 2007.

OHS: Seminar on Asbestos in Helsinki, April 2007, and BWI Seminar in Vienna, February 2008

In April 2007, the UITBB Secretariat members and representatives of affiliated unions participated in an International Seminar on Asbestos jointly organised by the UITBB and the Finnish Health Front in Helsinki. Among the participants were: trade union delegates, Associations of victims of asbestos, lawyers, representatives of several NGOs, as well as representatives of unions advocating the use of chrysotile asbestos from Brazil, which made the discussion very lively and open.

Following the seminar, the Secretariat has received continuing correspondence among others from the IBAS (International Ban Asbestos Secretariat) in London. One can say that the UITBB is an active internationally recognised advocate for an international ban on asbestos (as stipulated in many resolutions of UITBB meetings, conferences and seminars).

In February 2008, the UITBB Secretariat took part in the BWI Conference on Asbestos in Vienna, Austria. John Sutton was one of the speakers on the opening day and he also presented a number of proposals on behalf of the UITBB during the closing session. A common statement was issued at the end of the Conference.

EUROFFICE of the WFTU

The UITBB Secretariat took an active part in the 6th session of the WFTU European Office (ERO), which was held 3 - 4 March 2007 in Larnaka, Cyprus. It was an occasion to establish new contacts, to exchange information on the development of WFTU and TUI activities in Europe.

The UITBB General Secretary attended the 7th Session of the ERO, 23 - 24 November 2007 in Barcelona, Spain.

UITBB delegation to the 96th session of the ILC

The UITBB Secretariat members took part in the International Labour Conference in 2007. President John Sutton spoke at the plenary. The Secretariat had a meeting with the Director of ACTRAV Mr. Dan Cuniah and with Mr. Edmundo Werna to examine UITBB cooperation with the ILO, in particular around some regional projects and in the field of sectorial activities (Advisory Group for the Construction Industry). The WFTU representative Ms Osiris Oviedo has been very helpful in establishing contacts and in forwarding necessary information. Further measures will be taken to ensure a greater participation of the UITBB in ILO activities.

In March 2008, José Dinis, General Secretary of the UITBB, took part in an official meeting between ILO Director General Somavia and the leadership of the WFTU in Geneva. One of the aims of the meeting was to express the position of the WFTU on issues dealt with by the ILO and in particular to demand equal treatment, equal rights for the WFTU and its affiliates.

Participation in WFTU meetings

In addition to UITBB attendance at WFTU European Office meetings, our International has taken part in the WFTU World Conference for Working Women, which took place in Brussels, 12-13 September 2007 and in the Seminar on Working Women, organised in Barcelona in November 2007.

WFTU Presidential Council

The UITBB was represented by its President and General Secretary at the Presidential Council meeting of the WFTU in Brussels in December 2006.

On the occasion of the ILC 2007 in Geneva, the UITBB Secretariat took part in the Presidential Council meeting and informed comrades of our activities.

In January 2008, General Secretary José Dinis represented the UITBB at the WFTU Presidential Council Meeting in Khartoum, Sudan.

Meeting of the Council of Friends of the WFTU

Secretariat members took part in the Council of Friends of the WFTU in Geneva.

In general, the presence of secretariat members in Geneva at the time of the ILC made it possible to have many useful bi-lateral exchanges, to establish new contacts and make the UITBB known both to ILO officials and to national unions.

Meeting of the UITBB Interim Women's Committee

Thanks to the invitation extended by the Cyprus Building Workers' Union, it was possible to convene the Women's Interim Committee, 19-20 October 2007, in Larnaka. Delegates from seven countries attended and drafted recommendations to the UITBB Executive Committee for positive actions in the field of gender equality and working women's rights. Those recommendations are to be formally considered by this meeting.

Meetings of the Secretariat

The first official meeting of the new UITBB Secretariat took place in Geneva, in June 2007. Practical arrangements were made by our supporter union in Geneva.

A meeting of several members of the Secretariat took place in April 2007 in Helsinki on the occasion of the Asbestos seminar.

The third meeting of the Secretariat was held during the Asbestos Conference, in February in Vienna. Arrangements had been made by our Austrian affiliate Linksblock and we were able to meet at the headquarters of the ÖGB in Vienna.

Solidarity and Trade Union Rights

The Secretariat and UITBB member unions have participated in numerous solidarity campaigns expressing support for unions and peoples in the Middle-East (e.g. Lebanon, Palestinian territories, Syria), in Latin America (e.g. Cuba, Venezuela, Chile, Peru, Colombia), against Australian anti-union legislation, and more recently with Korean workers (the case of the 4 workers of Lafarge). The UITBB has extended solidarity and support to unions regardless of national or international affiliation. Also, a number of donations have been made in spite of our modest resources.

UITBB Newsletter - BULLETIN

Four editions of the Bulletin have been published since the 14th Congress. They have carried information on most of the above mentioned UITBB activities and other topics of interest to our affiliates. Thanks go to our comrade Robert Brun for his great efforts to make our Bulletin a useful resource for our organization.

Website

Considerable efforts have been made to improve the website of the UITBB, which is now updated on a regular basis.

However, it is imperative that unions share information with the Secretariat on how actively they visit the website and to what extent it helps them in their activity. The Secretariat calls upon affiliated and supporter unions to respond regularly and send material (in particular photos) which can be placed on the website.

Visits by UITBB President, General Secretary and/or other Secretariat members

UITBB leaders (President, General Secretary, Secretariat members) have attended numerous national and international events and visited a number of countries. The visit of Michalis Papanikolau to Syria in November 2007 resulted in an agreement to convene a Regional Meeting of Arab Construction Workers Union and UITBB Secretariat in Damascus in July 2008.

Comrades, as I conclude this report I want to briefly outline what I regard as our current strength and weaknesses - so that we might have a better understanding of what is needed to take our organization forward.

Strengths

- Despite limited resources the UITBB has come a long way in the last 10 years and we can truly say we are an active, functioning international organization - an organization that occupies a valuable space in the world labour movement.
- We are the only international organization among building, building materials and wood worker trade unions that adopts and promotes a militant, class struggle orientation for and on behalf of the vast number of workers in the occupations we cover.
- Our activity in various regions, our involvement in ILO activities, our participation in the WFTU's initiatives and other activities we have undertaken show us to be engaged in constructive work on many fronts.
- Our work around the specific issues of **asbestos** and the plight of **migrant construction workers** has been extensive and has made a difference in these key debates.
- Our face to the world through our website and regular bulletins is up-to-date and informative of the struggles our people are engaged in.
- Our hard working Secretary Rino Gelmi remains one of our greatest strengths with a knowledge of building union people, issues and languages that is remarkable - we salute his efforts.

Weaknesses

- Our finances are seriously inadequate and do not allow our organization to grow further nor allow us to involve ourselves in the broader range of activities that would be desirable.
- While our financial base has broadened with more than 15 countries contributing something, many of these contributions are small and others continue to avoid their financial responsibility to build the UITBB.
- Too much of the work of the UITBB is carried by Rino Gelmi and a small number of Secretariat members - much more commitment from others is needed.
- In some regions our comrades are not pulling their weight to ensure that the UITBB is active and vibrant in that part of the world.
- Our work at the ILO is not as systematic or detailed as we would wish it to be.
- Our contributions and feedback to the Bulletin and to the website are not as extensive as the struggles that our people are engaged in.
- Our inability to understand and access financial grants from supra-organizations like the ILO, UN and the EU places us at a severe disadvantage to the BWI who knows how to access grant money and then win loyalty from unions in the developing world by dispensing financial assistance.

Conclusion

Comrades, in conclusion let me say that by sketching today's global political context, by documenting our recent activities and then outlining my perception of our strengths and weaknesses I hope I have laid a sufficient platform for our discussions over the next few days.

The UITBB needs strong debate, new ideas, together with energy and commitment from the comrades in this room to take our work to a higher plane. Let us meet that challenge!

Thanks

John Sutton
28 May 2008