



**REGIONAL SEMINAR OF
AFRICAN CONSTRUCTION AND WOOD WORKERS' UNIONS
BAMAKO, MALI 12-15 MAY 2009**

Distinguished Minister, Distinguished representative of the ILO, General Secretary, delegates, comrades and friends

First of all allow me on behalf of the UITBB to wholeheartedly thank the Mali Construction Workers Union SYNIBABCOM and all our comrades and friends here in Mali for the wonderful warm welcome and hospitality you have demonstrated towards the guests at this meeting.

Thank you for the excellent working facilities and thank you to everyone assembled in anticipation of your contributions to the discussions over the next few days to ensure the success of this meeting – a meeting which is of major importance for us at the UITBB and will hopefully be a springboard for increased activity for our organization on the African continent.

WHY IS THIS MEETING IMPORTANT FOR THE UITBB?

In line with our understanding of trade union work both nationally and internationally we have always extended friendship, solidarity and technical assistance to our member unions in Africa in an effort to promote trade union training of African organizers and activists.

Over the last ten years I can point to the following African meetings which we have sponsored in conjunction with our African affiliates:

- March 1997, Dakar – regional seminar on collective bargaining, on trade union rights and OHS.
- September 1998, Dakar – regional seminar on asbestos in the light of the French experience.
- March 2003, Niamey – regional seminar on asbestos.
- March 2004, Cotonou – regional seminar on child labour, precarious labour and asbestos.
- November 2004, Cotonou – meeting of the Secretariat of the Coordinating Committee to work out a project on cooperation.
- March 2006, Lome – regional seminar.
- September 2007, Cotonou – General Assembly of the Coordinating Committee.

The UITBB regards this particular regional meeting we have convened here in Bamako to be critical and timely precisely because of the current extraordinary international situation and the unprecedented global economic and financial crisis.

According to the International Labour Office, the global economic crisis is expected to lead to a dramatic increase in the number of people joining the ranks of the unemployed, working poor and those in precarious employment. It is anticipated that global unemployment in 2009 could increase over 2007 by a range of 18 million to 30 million workers, and perhaps by even more than 50 million if the situation continues to deteriorate. The ILO report also said

that some 200 million workers, mostly in developing economies, could be pushed into extreme poverty.

This new report updates a preliminary estimate released last October indicating that the global financial crisis could increase unemployment between 15 to 20 million people by 2009. The ILO's current conclusions are as follows:

- The number of working poor - people who are unable to earn enough to lift themselves and their families above the US\$2 per person per day poverty line, may rise up to 1.4 billion, or 45% of all the world's employed.
- According to this study, sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia stand out as regions with extremely harsh labour market conditions and with the highest shares of working poor of all regions. Although the trend has been slightly improved over the past ten years, around four fifths of those employed were still classified as working poor in these regions in 2007.

The report lists a number of ILO recommended policy measures including:

- i) The need for wider coverage of unemployment benefits and insurance schemes, re-skilling redundant workers and protecting pensions from devastating declines in financial markets.
- ii) Public investment in infrastructure and housing, community infrastructure and green jobs, including through emergency public works.
- iii) Support to small and medium enterprises.
- iv) Social dialogue at enterprise, sectoral and national levels.

At all our UITBB meetings African construction union leaders underline the injustices generated by capitalist globalization and by the international financial sector, which as we know is now in near bankruptcy. They have pointed to the negative role of the IMF and the World Bank and the counter-productive structural adjustment plans and of course the vicious cycle of foreign debt which some African nations have reimbursed tens of times over.

According to late president of Burkina Faso Thomas Sankara, foreign debt has become a clever way to re-conquer Africa with western financial interests frequently shaping the growth and development into patterns and standards which are totally inappropriate to Africa:

1. For instance we see the IMF and World Bank through their adjustment plans pushing developing countries to privatise their public services - education, health care, transport, social security, etc. placing them in the hands of corporate interests particularly multinationals.
2. The WTO and its agricultural policy which often involves price dumping practices by developed countries, which lead to the destruction of local agriculture and food dependency in African nations.
3. Armed conflicts often fermented by non African vested interests.

The sum of these policies results in a great paradox - Africa, a continent blessed with huge natural resources, stands in contrast and contradiction with the abject poverty of much of its population.

I now want to speak of the UITBB and our ideas and approach to the big issues facing construction workers across the planet.

This year the UITBB celebrates the 60th anniversary of its foundation on 11-14 July 1949 in Milan.

There have been many highs and lows in this organisation over that time. Many fine working class leaders and activists have charted us through difficult waters. Since 1949, the UITBB has held 14 Congresses, the last one in 2006 in Athens, and the next one will be held in 2010.

We exist to promote and foster class struggle based unionism among building workers, as we also work to build the essential ingredient of unity among construction workers and construction unions.

We at the UITBB take the view that both of these elements are essential prerequisites to working class advancement. They are mutually reinforcing concepts - there is, if you like, a dialectical interaction between them. For a struggle to be successful you invariably need united action, and to build enduring unity we need to grow together through our participation in common struggles and action.

Today, we have member organizations in about 60 countries representing several millions of workers in the construction, wood and building materials industries.

The two greatest strengths we possess are the clarity of our vision, and the unshakeable resolve and commitment of the fighters who support UITBB.

Our clear vision stems from our understanding that capitalism is not the future of mankind. Capitalism is systemically unjust - a moribund socio/economic structure which continues to bring misery and poverty to the bulk of humanity. It is a small stage in our planet's history that must and will be overturned as humankind progresses. The UITBB's ideological position is clear - class struggle is the motive force of human history. Class struggle is the primary tool we have to explain the economic and social developments around us.

While others in the union movement believe that workers' needs can be accommodated under capitalism - that permanent advances can be made by workers living in harmony with the employing class - the UITBB has a different understanding of the mechanics of capitalism. Our view is that only through working class struggle can concessions be extracted, even if only on a temporary basis, as the employing class marshals for the next fight.

Our other major strength is the commitment of our affiliates and supporters. No-one associates with the UITBB because of the material assistance, prestige or personal reward they can receive. People who give their support freely do so because they are fighters for the working class and share our clear vision of the need for militant, class struggle based unionism in the building and construction industry.

We take an open political stand on all key world issues that impact on the working class and particularly the lives of building workers.

The UITBB believes it is impossible to divorce industrial issues from political, economic and social issues. These issues are totally interconnected in our view. You cannot progress industrial issues in isolation from the real world setting.

So in the global battle of the economically and militarily powerful against the billions of oppressed workers and peasants the UITBB takes public positions. We have firm views on the

Palestinian question, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia, the Cyprus question, the terrorist question and many others.

We are against those who exert imperialist might. We are against the occupiers and the oppressors. We are for the sovereign right of nations to choose their own path of development, free from the military and economic power of those who seek to act in an imperialist fashion. We are for self-determination and against the hypocritical lecturing of some western powers who insist their version of democracy should be enforced on other sovereign nations.

So comrades, I ask that you approach our work over the next few days with these themes in mind. Let us apply our creative energies and political experience to the many problems and issues we face.

Good luck to you all and best wishes for a successful meeting.

Viva International Solidarity!

**John Sutton
President, UITBB**