



**Report by UITBB President John Sutton  
Executive Committee Meeting, Tokyo, Japan  
8 – 9 December 2009**

Comrades

As the incumbent President of the UITBB it is my great pleasure to welcome you to this historic Executive Committee meeting of our international organisation. We gather on the occasion of our 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary – an important and hopefully memorable point in our long journey.

Delegates and guests have travelled long distances from different countries to continue the process of building our international in the building, wood and building materials industries.

I would like to most warmly thank our hosts, Kenkorou. The UITBB leadership thank them for the most excellent arrangements for this meeting of the Executive Committee and I am sure this bodes well for a high quality event. Meeting as we do in Japan gives all of us the opportunity to learn from the profound economic and political developments affecting Japan.

Comrades, the nineteen months since our last Executive Committee meeting has seen a deepening of the latest crisis of the capitalist system; our members, their families and our organisations are living with the terrible effects of unemployment or employment that carries the imminent threat of unemployment, reduced union membership, blackmailing by employers, new difficulties in organising and government attacks on union rights. These are well understood consequences, as employers never miss an opportunity to use a recession to break militant unions and co-opt docile ones. While it has been called the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), it began in the financing of US housing construction and worked up from there. I will return to this issue shortly.

Comrades, the UITBB exists to promote and foster class struggle based unionism among building workers and to link in with the broader struggles of workers in other industries. This we can best assist by facilitating the strengthening of unity among construction workers and construction unions.

The Secretariat, the Executive Committee and the many affiliates and supporters have worked hard since our last Executive Committee meeting and we face 2010 with many tasks on our plate including organising the next UITBB Congress.

The leadership of the UITBB looks forward to this meeting as an opportunity to build on our solid work of recent years and as an opportunity to further implement our programme.

### **Global Political Context**

Comrades, the years of 2008 and 2009 have seen a meltdown of modern capitalism the likes of which we haven't witnessed since the Great Depression of the early 1930's. The housing price bubble in the US gave rise to the sub-prime mortgage crisis which then spread to stock and property prices across the globe like a runaway contagion.

The biggest banks in the US, Europe and Asia were all at the point of collapsing or had actually collapsed. Supposedly venerable institutions of US capitalism like Lehman Brothers went under. Western banks loaded with toxic assets would have collapsed everywhere if it wasn't for unprecedented and concerted state intervention to underwrite the banking system.

The public, the taxpayers, the great majority of working people were called upon to carry the debts that were undoubtedly going to bankrupt the very pillars of financial capitalism – the same banks that brought on the crisis in the first place.

We saw the contagion quickly spread from financial capitalism to the so-called real economy (that is the production of goods and services) and the devastating result has been widespread bankruptcies, deep recession and vast unemployment.

This is the present state of affairs in most economies as we gather now in late 2009.

Comrades, the UITBB was born some 60 years ago in 1949 in Milan Italy. From then to around the time of the end of Bretton Woods, in the early 1970s, genuine progress was being made in terms of raising actual wage rates and conditions for many workers, at least in the developed countries.

Decades of working class organisation and pressure lay behind this, coming out the last great crisis of capitalist accumulation in the 1930s. Since the early 1970s though, pressures have flowed in the opposite direction and most workers in developed countries now find themselves engaged in long term concession

bargaining, while new projects are established in developing countries wherever wages are temporarily the lowest. This dynamic is nothing new, but its effects and the scale of the movement of global capital is new.

The accumulation of profit from productive capital has as ever driven the desperate need of the financial markets to chase higher and quicker profits by pursuing increasingly risky financial instruments that eventually destabilise the real economy. The situation is such that on a daily basis trillions of dollars flow around the world's financial system producing nothing of value, while the useful work of housing and feeding the estimated one billion members of the human race daily facing starvation is not addressed. The much trumpeted 'Millennium Development Goals' have effectively evaporated into thin air as these goals have become too expensive and the politicians and pop stars have lost interest.

With the rate of profit continuing to stagnate in the real economy as industry after industry falls into the hands of a small number of global concerns, this dynamic will outlast the current crisis and will be at the heart of the next. Whatever labels are used next time, there will be continued overproduction of financial instruments designed to squeeze more profit out of workers' labour and utilise less labour in the actual production of useful goods and services. Inevitably this will lead to further and deeper capitalist crises. The UITBB and our parent organisation the WFTU must prepare ideologically for the next crisis and act to educate and mobilise our people ahead off the inevitable consequences.

Last time we were gathered we were anticipating the end of the Bush Regime in the **United States of America**, which we have seen. The Bush Wars have now, against the will of the American electorate, become the Obama Wars, for which there is no end in sight. The Obama administration committed trillions to bail out Wall St, but has left ordinary Americans to bail themselves out of the effects of those wars and their ongoing recession. What has changed, is that the unquestioned hegemony of the US in world affairs is ending and a multi polar world is slowly emerging from the US' shadow.

Developments in **Latin America** offer great hope. After having thrown off the shackles of decades of US supported military dictatorships, a truer form of democracy is blooming in the region, with greater economic and social integration between countries based on mutual aid and developing fair trade arrangements. Popularly elected leaders like Chavez have successfully challenged the previously dominant 'there is no alternative' mantra of the neo-liberals and in so doing have broken the US hegemony in the region.

What is also changing in the region is the relationship of **Latin America** with the North. Gone are the days when a coup could be ordered with no come back. The valiant struggles of Zelaya and his supporters in Honduras bear out this shift in the balance of geo-political forces, with his fellow supporters in Central and

Southern America refusing to submit to the new consensus reality. This struggle is not over and we look forward to catching up on the latest news from our Latin American comrades.

The decline of the USA is matched by the inexorable rise of **Asia**, both east and west, with China and India showing that the world economy depends increasingly on economic growth generated more by their domestic markets and less from exports. This uneven capitalist development still leaves hundreds of millions of people in Asia scratching a living in the informal sectors and is a huge development issue in the Asia Pacific region.

**Africa** has suffered the most in the GFC. As food prices have been driven up by speculators moving from the financial markets into food, African economies' foreign direct investment has fallen, increasing unemployment and poverty. Most of Africa's valuable minerals are in the hands of foreign companies paying low tax, so governments have few options to finance much needed public infrastructure investment. African nations are still waiting for the reparations that are owed by their former colonial rulers, due through centuries of colonialism and intentional underdevelopment.

Rereading my report from the last Executive Meeting on the **Middle East** made me realise how little has changed with the new US President, he has promised much or at least suggested it, but the delivery is just not there. The shameful US Congress vote on the Goldstone Report into the Gaza Massacre about which the author himself (a Zionist supporter of Israel as a Jewish State) said "the investigation will give me nightmares for the rest of my life". The region is in political stasis and the hoped for wind of change from the White House has yet to arrive. Key Western powers (and increasingly my country Australia) still act as if Israel was the sole bearer of civilisation in a barbarous region, while ignoring Israel's status as the sole nuclear superpower in the region. All this, while decrying and threatening violent attacks on Iran's nuclear programme that is operating under international law. The UITBB leadership stand 100% with the dispossessed Palestinian people and demand their full rights under international law, without delay.

The UITBB also stands steadfast in its support for the peoples of Syria and Lebanon who have repeatedly suffered from Israeli aggression and occupation. We call for the return of the Golan and Shabbaa farms. We also call for a complete end to the shameful and bloody invasion of Iraq and the complete withdrawal of the military forces illegitimately occupying this sovereign nation.

The problems of the **EU** are bound up in their obsessive drift into neo-liberalism while simultaneously appearing to repudiate the concept. The recent affirmative vote by the Irish Republic on the 'Lisbon Treaty' has bought the neo-liberals close to their goal of fully subordinating the EU to market concerns. With France, Germany, Italy and soon the UK run by the political right, this course is not likely to change easily.

Comrades, this very brief survey of the global political map could not of course capture the full breadth of each continent's political and industrial issues. I very much look forward to the debates ahead on these and other topics over the next 2 days and for the UITBB once again to put the importance of class politics front and centre in day to day union work.

The UITBB has great reason to be proud of our growth and achievements, especially in this our 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary year. In this respect it is timely to salute the great efforts of our forebears. Comrades such as Veikko Pokkala, Lothar Lindner, Pedro Huilca, Hector Cuevas, Mauri Pera, and more recently our past President Robert Brun.

Any national union that consciously decides to join the UITBB and the WFTU family does so knowing that cosy social dialogue with their national employers and the state does not win historic gains for workers. This way generally leads to the demobilisation of activists and an over reliance on continued co-operation from employers that is only ever temporary. And the complacency generated is usually followed by a concerted employer attack when they judge conditions to be most favourable.

This latest crisis has provided useful cover for many employers to depart from the social partnership model and again to try to smash organised labour. Social dialogue has become too expensive and the true nature of labour- capital relations has been revealed, which is a surprise only to the foolish and naive. UITBB unions know that lasting gains are only won and maintained through militant workplace and industry –wide organisation. There is no effective substitute for this model.

At this time in history with the brutal lessons of the GFC hitting hard we have a great opportunity to take stock of these attacks and to plan our next Congress as an organising centre, to fight not for gentle reforms, but for fundamental changes to the economic and social order of our planet.

### **Industrial Work in the Context of Climate Change**

Comrades we also meet in the context of continuing political attempts to address the scientific evidence of human made climate change, the latest of these being next week in Copenhagen. The effects of climate change are being felt most acutely by those who are the poorest and least responsible for this slowly evolving global disaster.

As with the effects of the GFC, climate change is having its worst impact on African countries. According to the UN climate change is causing 150,000 deaths per year on that continent. So the effects of Western

colonialism extend beyond just economic under development and extend into climate. For these reasons the UITBB should campaign for Western reparations in developing and installing renewable energy technologies in African countries.

More generally, much can be done constructively within our industries, such as refurbishing old housing, improving insulation, reducing Co2 emissions thanks to the modernization of building standards and rethinking urban planning. These and other ideas can create many useful and productive jobs in our industries. This will only work as part of a broader class based approach to climate change related issues, such as; free public transport for all, nationalising major energy producers under democratic control and the intelligent use of scarce forest resources.

Our members working in the extreme heat, floods and wind made worse through climate change deserve our special attention in the decades to come. The UITBB will continue to play its part in securing climate justice as well as economic justice for our members and their families.

We must work hard to thread climate change issues into our work. The impact of it will only multiply without serious and urgent action to reduce global carbon emissions. This can only properly happen in a globally just framework that takes account of the developed world's carbon debts to the majority world. We must avoid constructing through Copenhagen a new form of 'carbon colonialism' that allows rich countries to further develop their carbon consuming industries, while offering a pittance to other countries for their carbon credits.

### **Recent Progress**

The last nineteen months have been a busy time for the UITBB as the following brief summary outlines.

#### **AFRICA**

In Africa the UITBB held two events, a UITBB-ILO seminar on Social Protection and OHS in the construction and wood industries on 12 – 16 May 2009. We are grateful to SYNIBABCOM from Mali who hosted the seminar in Bamako. Also UITBB affiliated unions observed a Day of Action for the implementation of international labour standards in Africa on 25 October 2008.

#### **ASIA-PACIFIC**

In Bali, Indonesia from 14 – 16 March 2009, the UITBB in cooperation with FKUI-Indonesia hosted the 7<sup>th</sup> seminar of construction workers' unions in the Asia-Pacific region. Key issues on the agenda were OHS and labour migration.

## **EUROPE**

In Puerto de la Cruz, 4 – 5 March 2009, in the Canary Islands (Spain), the Central Trade Union Organisation of Canary Islands - Intersindical Canarias - hosted the 3<sup>rd</sup> UITBB regional meeting for European construction and wood workers' unions. The main topics included the global economic crisis and its consequences for our industries, EU policies and solidarity with Palestine.

On 20 March this year General Secretary José Dinis participated in a Portuguese-Spanish meeting regarding labour inspection, social security and eliminating racial discrimination.

The General Secretary José Dinis also took part in the Congress of the Spanish Construction Workers' Union FECOMA on 24 – 27 March. During the Congress he held discussions with various European unions on their participation in future UITBB events and activities.

## **LATIN-AMERICA**

The UITBB supported the secretariat meeting of FLEMACON (Latin-American Federation of Construction, Wood and Building Materials Workers' Unions) around the 1<sup>st</sup> May as well as supporting the training seminar for activists of construction workers unions, held in Cuba, during June.

## **MIDDLE-EAST**

In Damascus, Syria, on 5 -6 July 2008, in cooperation with the Federation of Building Workers of the Syrian Arab Republic, the UITBB organized an International Seminar on 'Building Capacities of Construction Workers' unions in the Private Sector', as well as holding a solidarity meeting.

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In Larnaka, Cyprus, 15 – 17 October, in cooperation with the Cyprus Construction Workers' Union, the UITBB organised a training seminar on collective bargaining for activists of construction workers unions from the Middle-East region.

## **WOMEN'S COMMITTEE**

In Canberra, Australia, on 25 – 26 November 2008, in cooperation with the CFMEU Construction and General Division, the UITBB hosted the 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting of the UITBB Women's Committee. An extensive report with proposals to the Secretariat was prepared and widely communicated to all affiliated unions.

In Geneva, June 2009, Marina Stavrinou from the Cyprus Construction Workers' Union represented the UITBB at the discussion on equal opportunities during the International Labour Conference. A report was produced and sent to all affiliated unions.

## **OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY**

In Seoul, 29 June – 2, July 2008, Martin Kingham and Séan Marshall from the CFMEU represented the UITBB at the ILO World Congress on OHS. They took an active part in the debate on Asbestos.

This year Pat Preston and Séan Marshall from the CFMEU, represented the UITBB at the Asian Asbestos Conference at the end of April 2009. This Conference oversaw the launch of the Asian Ban Asbestos Network (ABAN) with Pat Preston elected as an Adviser to the group.

## **ILO**

In Lisbon, Portugal, 9 – 13 February, General Secretary José Dinis took part in the ILO regional meeting for Europe on the political response to the economic crisis and for decent work in Europe and Asia.

## **UN – HABITAT**

The UITBB President John Sutton, took part in the 4<sup>th</sup> World Urban Forum in Nanjing, China, 3 – 7 November 2008.

## **TRAINING ACTIVITIES**

The UITBB with the assistance of APHEDA (Australia) and the CFMEU held a training seminar for construction workers in Vietnam.

Also the UITBB Seminars in Larnaka, Cyprus, and in Bamako, Mali, were important training events for union leaders and activists.

## **INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION**

The Secretariat published 3 editions of the UITBB newsletter in 4 languages. The newsletter carried detailed information and reports on UITBB activities, interviews with trade unionists and solidarity statements.

The Secretariat has deployed major efforts to improve the website, which has become a central tool of information and communication with the membership and the broader public. Thanks go to our comrade Juan-Luis Moreno for his great work on the website.

## **WFTU EVENTS**

In November 2008, General Secretary José Dinis, participated in meetings with the Transport TUI to prepare for the successful WFTU International Conference which was held in December 2008 in Lisbon.

General Secretary José Dinis also took part in the WFTU delegation that visited China from 2 – 12 December 2008.

In Lisbon, Portugal: General Secretary José Dinis participated in the International Conference on Globalization and its Consequences on Workers, organised by the WFTU on 15 – 16 December 2008. This conference was the beginning of a series of conferences held on other continents.

General Secretary José Dinis participated in the WFTU Presidential Council in Cyprus, 7 – 13 March 2009.

The Portuguese UITBB affiliate FEVVICOM participated in the WFTU International Action Day, on April 1<sup>st</sup> 2009.

In Hanoi, Vietnam, President John Sutton participated in the International Conference and other events organised on the occasion of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the VGCL, on 25-26 July 2009. President John Sutton had a fraternal meeting with the president of the VNUBW.

In Athens, Greece, General Secretary José Dinis participated in the 23 November 2009 meeting of WFTU and TUI's secretariats to discuss the development and strengthening of TUI's.

#### **UITBB SECRETARIAT**

In Paris, France, at the headquarters of the Paris Construction Workers Union on 12 – 13 January 2009, the UITBB Secretariat held its first 2009 meeting. The Secretariat also met with Freddy Huck, President of the Agriculture TUI.

In Puerto de la Cruz, on the eve of the European meeting, the Secretariat held its second meeting on 4 May 2009.

#### **SOLIDARITY**

The Secretariat has continued to develop broad solidarity activities in support of global trade unions rights and freedoms. The Secretariat has organised specific campaigns through the website and in the newsletter, sending messages of protest, petitions and letters of support in respect to these campaigns. Currently the Secretariat is organising the campaign to free imprisoned unionist Murad Akincilar.

General Secretary José Dinis, participated in an action denouncing the "Return" EU Directive targeting migrant workers on 2 June 2009.

#### **Agenda for Change**

In respect to the draft UITBB Action Plan 2010, you will all have received it in your conference materials. I think it sets out an achievable plan of action for next year, naturally it is in draft form and we look forward to finalising its contents with you.

Rather than go through the strengths and weaknesses of the UITBB which I have outlined in past meetings, I would like at this point to present some further issues for consideration and some ideas for change, some of which are relevant to the draft UITBB Action Plan 2010. Others are more far reaching and may operate on a longer time frame. These ideas are very much open for debate and I am hopeful that comrades will debate these ideas over the next two days.

1. How can we activate the role of the Executive Committee as the decision-making body between conferences and how do we achieve the greater involvement of Executive Committee members? Their role cannot be limited to attending one Executive Committee meeting per year, with the Secretariat bearing all the responsibility at other times. Executive Committee members have the responsibility to represent the UITBB at regional and international events. They should send information on their country and region to the Secretariat as a matter of course.
2. How do we strengthen the role and task of continental and regional meetings, and regional coordinators (Flemacon, African Coordinating committee) and develop their role in gaining new members for the UITBB?
3. With regard to training activities (training for organisers, OHS training etc): in view of the urgent needs in Africa and Latin America, I suggest bilateral projects under the UITBB umbrella, e.g. Cyprus running a training project with one or two countries in the Middle-East, Australia continuing its bilateral projects with Vietnam, Portugal cooperating with one or two African countries, etc.
4. Should we involve institutions such as APHEDA in Australia and other NGOs regarding increasing women's participation in our industries?
5. Brazilian and Australian unions could embark on a project of co-operation around the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. The CFMEU built the infrastructure for Sydney 2000 and in Brazil our unions will be involved in building the infrastructure for 2016. Such a project could ensure an exchange of experience on problems met in Sydney, safety on the construction sites and banning the use of asbestos in all new construction.
6. To take concrete steps address the dominance of industries by global corporations, I suggest setting up a small working group on one multinational, eg. Holcim, or any other, where some of our

affiliates have members. The aim of the working group would be first to collect information, promote cooperation between unions of that same multinational, leading finally to setting up an official group dealing with the multinational concerned.

7. I propose that we approach the WFTU to establish a pool of experts to be drawn upon in setting up training programmes.
8. In view of the strong programme of action from the UITBB Women's Committee, I suggest the next meeting be held in Africa, with the involvement of the WFTU if possible.
9. In respect to publications and communications, it is imperative that short information items be sent to the Secretariat by the Executive Committee members from their regions. There is also an ongoing need for affiliates to upgrade computer and internet facilities.

## **Conclusion**

This overview of UITBB activity shows an organisation that is vibrant and growing and in this summary I have only scratched the surface of UITBB activity. The UITBB Action Plan 2010 and the 'Agenda for Change' suggest some substantial events and ideas for consideration and action.

As the capitalist class have returned to business as usual so quickly after the momentous events in 2008, with the application of only 'light touch' regulation as so called 'G20 reforms', it is increasingly clear that this economic system is not reformable, as the UITBB has always argued.

With capital seeking to use the cover of a recession to rip away hard won union gains all over the world, construction workers buffeted by both financial and climate storms face a bleak future in the absence of an effective class based trade union movement. This of course gives meaning to the UITBB's position on this issue and need to see issues impacting on our members from a broad analytical perspective.

Our strengths stem from our politics as do our weaknesses, mainly the lack of funding for further activities. However it is ultimately national affiliates and their members that are the lifeblood of the UITBB, not the size of our bank accounts. The only way we will ultimately transform society is through the patient hard work of political and industrial education and collective action by our members in the workplace.

Comrades I believe the UITBB is moving steadily forward and I look to this historic meeting to flesh out our trajectory in the near term until Congress. Please ensure our work is successful over the next two days through your active participation. Thank you

**Viva UITBB.**

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