

Light in Our Minds – Fire in Our Hearts!¹

by Vasco Pedrina

Since the 1980s, we have witnessed the political breakthrough of neoliberalism with its massive wave of privatisations, deregulation of the financial sector and of employment relations, as well as the partial dismantling of social security systems. That wave was followed by the enormous expansion of financial markets, along with their speculative excesses. All of that was a result of severe economic crises; resulting in a catastrophic social impact and very ominous political consequences, marked by the upsurge of extreme right-wing populist parties. As a result, the European Union whose social model has suffered hitherto unimaginable blows is on the edge of collapsing. As predicted a few years ago, by the great historian Eric Hobsbawm before his death, we are going through a long cycle of world economic crisis. The consequence would be a great danger of a renationalisation of policy aims, leading to the extremes of the last century, which was deeply scarred by two terrible world wars and their human and social destruction.

The uneven developments that characterise this period are marked by a global power shift:

- From the real economy and nation states towards global financial capital;
- From labour to capital, the social balance of power established after the Second World War under the slogan of "Never Again!" having been upset, with the collateral effect of an awesome rise in economic and social inequalities;
- From the industrialised countries of the North (United States, Europe/EU) towards the emerging economies of the South (BRICS countries), with an in many cases dramatic weakening of the trade unions in northern hemisphere countries not being compensated by a corresponding strengthening of the unions in the countries of the South.

Finally, over the past 30 years we have witnessed unprecedented technological advances in the communication and transport sectors, a prerequisite for and a motor of the ongoing process of capitalist globalisation. The world's ultimate colonisation is underway. It concerns the domination of the oceans (with a focus on raw materials), space and of the internet. In the digital world, this leads to a further shift of power from governments to companies.

As a result of these processes, capital is now in a position to internationalise itself as never before, while avoiding the pressure of trade unions and of progressive political forces at the level of the individual nation states. Capital is therefore no longer interested in social and political compromises; it wants outright authoritarian hegemony.

In such a context, times are hard for the international trade union movement; much harder than they were 25 years ago. The challenges are even more gigantic. We are facing immense responsibilities given the political inability of nation states to control international capital, the sentiment of helplessness, the frustrations spreading among peoples resulting in the rise of xenophobic and right-wing populist forces.

However, all of that must not lead us to surrender to despair. We must, instead, face up to realities while following the adage of Antonio Gramsci, one of the grandfathers of the European labour movement, who said: "We must combine the pessimism of reason with the optimism of will-power."

'Another world is possible'. We can draw inspiration from the "best practices" in our struggles. The 'Sport campaigns' around infrastructure construction work for big events that BWI started with the Soccer championship in South Africa and now continues in Brazil, Russia and Qatar are examples for highly visible international trade union solidarity campaigns. These campaigns have resulted in better working conditions and also growing trade union membership. Thanks to the campaign in Brazil, our membership has since doubled in recent years. These are encouraging international examples to organise the trade-union counter-offensive, which is necessary and urgent for a radical change of course. Such a change can be achieved if our movement is determined in confronting the following challenges:

A) We must arm ourselves with a vision and a programme for an alternative globalisation, based on equality, social justice and sustainable development, as is the case at this Congress with the "2014-2017 Strategic Plan". We must also - at least at the continental level - formulate our demands and the measures to achieve them, so as to win the hearts and minds of workers in a dynamic process of mobilisation. Negotiations at the bargaining table without

strong pressure from below, which have hitherto characterised the action of many of our affiliates, will no longer be enough to enable us to advance. That's why we must rediscover bottom-up trade unionism, anchored firmly in the workplace and with committed activists who are willing to take risks!

B) The question of power must be a factor of our foremost concern: the power that is slipping away from nation states and trade unions must be regained by our movement at the continental and global levels. In today's circumstances that seems utopian; but however difficult it may be to resolve, it remains a key question. The tendency towards national isolationism is being increasingly felt, even within the already weakened trade unions, especially in those parts of the world – like Europe – that have been hit hard by the economic crisis. Mass unemployment, mounting inequalities between countries, differences in trade-union cultures, and unfortunately also the nationalist prejudices inherited from the traumatic history of the twentieth century are the causes. The task is to build and expand international union networks that are well rooted in each national reality. The opportunities offered by the new digital world should be fully seized for that purpose, especially in our cross-border campaigns.

C) Such leverage will also serve to strengthen the influence we can exert on international organisations like the United Nations (UN), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the World Bank, etc. This pressure should also be directed to regional organisations like the EU. The union campaigns, in connection with the infrastructure projects for major sporting events like the Football World Cups in Brazil, Russia and Qatar are signalling the way forward.

D) The weakening role of nation states means that trade unions must engage in an incisive battle for the democratisation of the supranational institutions. In Europe, the ETUC and its national affiliates today are fighting for a democratisation and coordination of economic policy. This must include a shift of decision making power from the Council of the European Union (representing the governments EU member states) to the directly elected European Parliament. Confronted by the EU's extremely anti-social bias, the triple fight that lies ahead of us is that of:

- defending acquired social rights at the national level;
- reversing the socially destructive neoliberal austerity policies produced in the Brussels institutions;
- working for the democratisation of the existing power structures, in opposition to increasingly authoritarian practices.

E) The economic and social development of the "emerging economies" should help to raise the rate of unionisation, presently at 7% worldwide. In Europe, where the big battalions of the organised working class have traditionally been found,

trade unions have been losing many members – for a long time now, and in a lot of countries. We must do all we can to pursue an organising offensive in the countries of The South.

F) In the building and wood industries, where precarious employment and the informal economy are particularly widespread, it is necessary to develop new forms of union organisation. "Best practices" already exist for the unionisation of women, migrant workers, and the bogusly self-employed. In Switzerland 50% of the 200'000 Members of the trade union UNIA have a foreign passport. The successful recruitment of migrant workers was achieved through trade union full time officials who were migrants, and trade union structures that allow migrants to meet and discuss their specific problems while at the same time being able to fully engage in the organisation as a whole.

G) We are, unfortunately, no longer in the era of social partnership and social peace that followed the Second World War in Europe. Faced by the "top-down class struggle" shamelessly pursued by international capital, a revived, combative trade unionism represents our only hope of survival and fulfillment. Strategic campaigns, cross border solidarity and global protest against inhuman working conditions for construction workers at mega-sport events or other huge infrastructure investments, like the Panama Canal expansion project, new motor highway construction in south-east Europe or hydro dams like the Bujagali dam in Uganda are steps towards international trade unionism and must be vigorously supported by activists. International Framework agreements with multinational companies have proven useful instruments in strengthening our national affiliates and help them in their struggle for decent work for their members at this huge often publicly funded construction projects.

H) I would not fail to mention what I consider to be our most urgent task: that of fostering the emergence of a new generation of young trade unionists, who

- know how to internalise our movement's values of "liberty, equality, and fraternity",
- are imbued with the spirit of internationalism,
- consider trade union work to be a mission and not just a job.

"Light in Our Minds – Fire in Our Hearts!" It is with these words from Herman Greulich, the founding father of the Swiss labour movement, that I pass the baton; I wish you all much courage and good luck in all the struggles that lie ahead.

1 This contribution is based on his farewell speech at the BWI World Congress.

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