

A tu per tu con il sindacato

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Interview with Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary



In May 2000, Sharan Burrow became the second woman to be elected President of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). In December 2004, Sharan was the first woman to be elected President of

the world union body, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), which represents 148 million workers in 231 affiliated organisations across 150 countries. In October 2000, Sharan also became the first woman to be elected President of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions Asia Pacific Region Organisation. In 2006, she was elected as the President of the International Trade Union Confederation, at the ITUC Founding Congress in Vienna. Sharan was born in 1954 in Warren, a small town in western NSW, into a family with a long history of involvement in unions and the struggle to improve the lives of working people. Her great, great grandfa-

ther participated in the shearers' strike of 1891/92, becoming one of the first organizers for the Australian Workers' Union and standing for the state seat of Cobar for the fledgling Australian Labour Party in 1896. Sharan studied teaching at the University of NSW in 1976 and began her teaching career in high schools around country NSW. She became an organiser for the NSW Teachers' Federation, based in Bathurst, and was President of the Bathurst Trades and Labour Council during the 1980s. Sharan was elected Senior Vice-President of the NSW Teachers' Federation and became President of the Australian Education Union (AEU) in 1992. She represented the AEU on the ACTU Executive through the 1990s. Sharan was previously Vice-President of Education International from 1995 to 2000. Education International is the international organisation of education unions representing 24 million members worldwide. She is currently, a member of the Governing Body of the International Labour Organization and a member of the Stakeholder Council of the Global Reporting Initiative. As part of her ILO responsibilities, Sharan chairs the Workers' Group of the Sub-Committee on Multinational Enterprises. Sharan Burrow is also a founding member of the Southern Cross Cli-

mate Coalition, formed last June 2008 by the ACTU, ACF, the Climate Institute and ACOSS to respond to the vast challenges of climate change in Australia. On June 25 2010, she was elected General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC).

On June 25th, during the World Congress in Vancouver you have been elected ITUC's General Secretary: could you tell us about your emotions and your priority proposals for the four years of your mandate?

I am deeply honoured to have been elected by the Vancouver to lead the ITUC over the coming four years. The trade union movement worldwide faces enormous challenges, perhaps as big as at any time in our history, as we are confronted with the effects on working people everywhere of the global economic crisis. This crisis is the direct result of an economic model which has given priority to the small minority of rich and powerful, at the expense of working men and women. Tens of millions of people have been forced out of work by the crisis, living standards are under enormous pressure, and hundreds of millions of people in the poorest countries live in severe poverty, without the means to earn a decent living or provide for their children, the elderly and others who depend on them. Trade unionists in countries across the world face discrimination, the risk of losing their jobs due to their union activities, and in many cases also violence and even death just for standing up for fundamental rights at work.

The Vancouver Congress provided a clear framework of policies and actions which the international trade union movement needs to implement in order to bring about a complete change in the global economy, to put it at the service of workers. I am confident that, based on our strong and enduring traditions of solidarity and international cooperation, we will be able to make a real impact in the interests of working people.

The document presented in the Congress in Vancouver began with a paragraph headed "Change globalization." What are the positions and the role of Trade Unions in the processes of global reform of International Intergovernmental Bodies, from the International Monetary Fund, to World Bank, to World Trade Organization? Can you also explain your request for a

UN summit aimed at supporting a tax on financial transactions?

We have mapped out a practical, realistic and ambitious agenda for reform of the international system, and in particular the international financial institutions and the WTO. At the heart of this is reform of the international financial system, based on regulation of banks and finance and putting the financial sector at the service of the real economy. We are demanding that employment be at the centre of economic decision-making, rather than at the margins as has been the case up to now. Bringing the International Labour Organisation to the centre of economic decision making at the international level is a key element of this.

In addition, it is the responsibility of governments to put an end to the system which rewards greed and speculation – the banks and finance have been allowed to get away with destructive and damaging behaviour for far too long, and governments now have to step up to their responsibilities to govern in the interests of the many rather than the few. Individual governments must regulate their banks effectively, and they must cooperate internationally to stop banks undermining regulation by simply moving to jurisdictions which are less regulated.

Our call for a Financial Transactions Tax is a central component of the necessary reforms. Such a tax, which would bring in hundreds of billions of Euros of revenue each year, would provide vitally-needed funding for national economic development, for international development assistance to help create jobs, build infrastructure and provide social protection for the poorest, and it would also unlock the money required to help developing countries undertake the necessary mitigation and adaptation measures to tackle climate change. Without this, there is little chance that the world will be able to reach agreement on the far-reaching changes needed to stop catastrophic climate change.

In your inaugural speech you said: "I am a fighter for women's rights and we must still work hard for the inclusion of women in workplaces and in our Unions". What are the ITUC demands, actions and policies with respect to this double issue?

Real progress has been made in many countries,

both in society and within the trade union movement. The ITUC itself has set high standards with its clear requirements for gender parity in our Congress delegations, in ensuring greater opportunities for women within in our own structures and in the trade union movement nationally. Nevertheless, discrimination is still a fact of life for the vast majority of women, at home and in the community. Our research has shown that worldwide, women are paid at least 20% less than men for equivalent work. Women are concentrated in precarious and informal work in both developing and industrialised countries, and have been hit especially hard by the global economic crisis. Our work for gender equality will continue to be a centrepiece of the ITUC's activities, expressed through campaigns to support women's rights in every workplace and every industry. Gender equality in society can only be achieved when discrimination in work is eliminated.

Among the positions you have been given in the past, there was to be member of the ILO Governing Body. On the basis of your personal experience, how important is the influence of this tripartite Organization? What are its weaknesses against which the commitment of the Unions can play a positive role? May finally the ILO become a privileged place for tripartite social dialogue, even replacing other forms of social dialogue which are supposed to be substantially exhausted?

The ILO is an extremely important body for workers. It is the only organisation of its type within the entire UN system, and the fact that the trade union movement has institutional representation through its tripartite structure enables us to have international influence across the range of issues of concern to working people. As trade unions, we have a responsibility to continue to invest time and effort in the work of the ILO, to ensure that our interests are properly reflected in its standard-setting, its supervisory mechanisms and in the many programmes which it runs. At the same time, the ILO's role in the international system, in particular with regard to economic, finance and trade issues, needs to be considerably strengthened. The fact that, in their response to the global economic crisis, the G20 group of major economies has included employment issues and the ILO in particular in its

Summit Declarations, notably from the Pittsburgh Summit, is encouraging. But we need to keep up the pressure, on the G20 and all other governments, to ensure that the ILO is brought fully into the system of global economic governance. The first responsibility for making this happen is with national governments, and we rely on our national affiliates to push this agenda forcefully in their interactions with national governments. The ILO itself cannot substitute for national social dialogue, but it has a vitally important role in promoting social dialogue at the national level. The ILO's work in promoting and defending fundamental rights at work, in particular the right to organise (Convention 87) and the right to collective bargaining (Convention 98) are also very important in enabling working people to come together in trade unions, without which no social dialogue is possible.

Let's talk again about ITUC. The path, in 2006, led to the founding congress in Vienna, was truly historic. It can be argued that in the world today there is only one large central union: the International Confederation of Trade Unions which now represents 176 million workers belonging to 311 affiliated unions in 155 countries. Amazing numbers but often the International Trade Unionism is scarcely known and considered far-acting from the real needs of people. What degree of collaboration/interaction between the ITUC and its Affiliates? And what about the reciprocal commitment between the ITUC and the Global Union Federations (GUF)? Finally how are the evolving relationships between the Union and the multifaceted world of global NGOs?

The creation of the ITUC in 2006 was a development of historic importance. Since that time, we have built a strong and vibrant organisation, which has unparalleled representativity and legitimacy. We are now entering the next phase of the ITUC's development, and with the mandate provided by the Vancouver Congress, we will be focusing very strongly on building up the cooperation with the ITUC's affiliates. International policies, trends and events have a very direct impact on life at work and in the overall direction of national economies, so we need to have the closest possible linkage of the work at national, regional and international levels within the trade union movement. This means

integrating international issues into the daily business of trade unions, and not treating them as something separate or apart from the core activities.

We cooperate closely with the Global Union Federations, on an individual basis and through the Council of Global Unions. As in any endeavour, there is always scope to deepen and widen this collaboration, and this too will be an important priority area. One of the aspects of the cooperation which I want to extend relates to trade union organising. We have real potential to work together, given our respective mandates, to increase the level of international support to our colleagues in developing and industrialised countries who are seeking to organise, for example in multinational companies.

We have good relations with civil society across the spectrum of our work, on development and economic issues, climate change, workers' rights, gender discrimination, migrant workers' rights, child labour, forced labour, and a range of other issues. I want to consolidate and build these relationships even further, since there are so many issues of common concern and enormous potential to build powerful alliances with the strength and legitimacy of the trade union movement at the heart of civil society action.

You started your Trade Unionist experience in the sector of Education in the Teachers' union from local to global level. What could be the role of the Union in the school's world not just in improving bargaining rights of staff, but also in promoting values of International solidarity and inclusive society, particularly for the younger generations? Could you recall the most impressive experiences which influenced your life and your choices?

Education is the cornerstone of any democratic society, and the basis for social and economic progress. Yet in very many countries, government investment in education is only a small percentage of what is really needed, meaning that millions upon millions of children miss out on the chance to build their knowledge and skills and thus ensure decent lives for themselves and their families in later life. Added to that, many governments are now making cuts in public expenditure and failing to make the required new investments in schools, vocational

training and higher education. The consequences of this will be long lasting and damaging to these societies and economies. Trade unionists in the education sector are fighting hard against this, as are trade unionists in other parts of the public sector, and it is in the interests of all workers, whether in the public or private sector, to act in solidarity with their colleagues in education, health and other vital public services. The ITUC will be working with its affiliates and the Global Union Federations to support this work. Along with this, we will be really paying attention to the extremely difficult situation of young workers across the world. The failure of the economic system to deliver decent jobs and prospects to young people, made much worse by the global economic crisis, means that a whole generation of young people risk exclusion from work, and to a large extent from society. This is a terrible injustice, and one which may have real consequences for societies for many years to come. We are determined to do all we can to turn this around, and ensure that young people get a real chance. My interest and commitment to equity and justice began even before I started as a full-time trade union official. I'm the daughter of a fourth generation of labour supporters in my family. My great-great-grandfather was in fact a participant in the shearers' strikes in the early 1890s, and was one of the first 20 or so organizers for the Australian Workers' Union. He and my great-grandfather both stood for seats in New South Wales for Labour governments, and my grandfather and father have been political activists, and my father in particular, a community activist all of his life. The pattern of community concern and activity was similar on my mother's side. So trade unionism has always been a part of my life.

Beside your international activity, you played for a long time an important role within the Trade Union in Australia which were confronted recently with a Government highly anti-bargaining/anti-union and even looking for individual labour relationships. Which were the attitude and the responses of Australian Trade Unionism at this time and, beside the changes in the government's orientation, how much the Australian industrial relations are different from the European ones, particularly regarding the idea of social model and the industrial relations ?

Australia has a system of industrial relations which has many specific national characteristics, shared with only a few other countries. To give an accurate and comprehensive analysis of all these would require many pages of analysis – perhaps even a whole book. But the fundamental principles are just the same as in other democratic countries. A system based on the workers’ right to union organization and representation, collective bargaining and the right to freedom from discrimination and exploitation have all been long-standing principles which have underpinned Australia’s system. These rights came under sustained and profound attack from the previous government. At the end of the 1990’s the government launched a full-scale assault on the rights of workers in Australia’ ports, in one of the worst such attacks by a government in a democratic country for many years. We managed, through united trade union action, to stop the government from achieving its objective to remove unions from the waterfront, and international solidarity played an important part in that struggle. Then, the government introduced its notorious “work choices” legislation, designed to undermine collective representation and weaken trade unions as a force for justice in the labour market and society generally. The Australian trade union movement rose to the challenge, with a powerful and unified campaign to build public opinion against this appalling legislation. The campaign against these laws run by the trade union movement, with other civil society organizations supporting us, was a major factor in the defeat of that government in 2007m, and the election of a Labour government which has begun the task of restoring rights at work.