

UITBB SPEECH AT THE CFMEU CONFERENCE, 17-18 OCTOBER 2005 - MELBOURNE

Comrade Chair,
Dear Delegates,
Comrades and Friends,

First of all allow me on behalf of the Trades Union International of Workers in the Construction, Wood and Building Materials Industries UITBB to thank the CFMEU Construction and General Worker's Division and its leadership for the kind invitation to attend this National Conference and for the warm and fraternal welcome and hospitality. It is a great honour and an enormous pleasure to be back in Australia, ten years after my first visit, to meet with unionists and workers of on of our major member unions, and to follow your discussions. But if we are here today it is also to express to all of you the firm and militant solidarity of millions of building and wood workers represented in our UITBB with your relentless struggle against a right wing conservative government and its anti-labour and anti-union legislation, which is in blatant violation with ILO labour standards, in particular Convention 87 and 98, and which places the Australian government among those governments, which show utter disrespect for international law, for union freedoms and workers' human rights. We are here today, dear comrades, to reassure you of our solidarity, which together with your struggle will sooner or later thwart the government plans to muzzle the vanguard of the Australian working class.

These decisions of the Howard government are part and parcel of global capitalism and its most reactionary forces today, headed by the US administration, aiming at rolling back people's and workers' rights, at dismantling everything achieved since the Second World War.

Allow me to briefly share with you how we at the UITBB perceive the world situation today: In 1974, the UN decided to eliminate poverty by the year 2000. We have witnessed over the last ten years conferences and meetings at highest level all pledging the same thing: Eliminating poverty. In 2000, out of 6 billion people, 2.7 billion lived under the poverty threshold, and among them 1.3 billion in absolute poverty. In 2003, the number of poor had increased by 100 million reaching the figure of 2.8 billion, etc. Recent news from Western Africa, tell us that hundreds of millions of people are in danger of starvation or starve, that populations of those countries are confronted with no real prospect for a better future. As a reply to this, the G8 headed by the US administration and closely followed by the EU, using the international instruments of their policy – the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank, the OECD, NATO, offer as a solution new-liberal economic recipes, privatization, competition, reduction of public services, casual labour and in fact abolishment of labour legislation, etc. In addition to this and instead of reversing completely the disastrous course of their economic and social policy they continue to impose on the world their so-called “war on terror”.

Since G.W. Bush started his war on terrorism, the world has become much more insecure, acts of terrorism have accumulated and hundreds, thousands of innocent civilians have lost their life. Let me be absolutely clear about this: The UITBB and its member unions unequivocally and firmly condemns the barbarous killing and maiming of innocent civilians anywhere in the world. Terrorist actions such as the recent one in Baghdad killing over 100 of our fellow construction workers do not serve the just cause of the people, those acts are inhuman and the responsible people must be brought to justice. But comrades, can we close our eyes over the fact that there is a criminal war and

occupation going on in Iraq, that the US, the United Kingdom and the countries of the alliance are by fault of their leaders countries at war, guilty of killing, destroying human lives, guilty of robbing national resources of an independent country and in fact committing war crimes, crimes against humanity? Do we really know who hides behind the perpetrators of terrorist actions, who plans and finances them? What we know is that the price of this war on terror is paid by innocent civilians, by working people in the Middle East, but also by working people in the developed countries. The war against terrorism has become a pretext to reduce political and civic rights (e.g. the US and the UK), to introduce so-called anti-terrorist legislation, it has led to greater insecurity, to violation of civic rights, arbitrary arrests and expulsion, growing xenophobia and racism. It is aimed at taking away attention from the most urgent economic and social problems facing workers and the vast majority of the population.

In a statement adopted this year, the UITBB declared, “The people of the M-E must be able to live in peace and decide their own future. This is an indispensable pre-condition for the security of all people of the world... What is urgent is the unconditional retreat of all occupying forces and the opening of negotiations under the aegis of the UN with the aim of finding just solutions to all problems of the region”.

Turning now to Africa, our affiliated unions in the construction and wood sector keep stressing the disastrous impact of neo-liberal readjustment policies imposed by the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO. 70-80 percent of building workers are precarious, informal workers. They are hired for one day, a week, a month if they are lucky, their employers, often multinationals, don't pay any social benefits, wages are extremely low, 1 dollar a day, unions where and when they exist, are threatened, etc. You all read about the recent decision by the G8 countries to cancel the foreign debt of 18 African countries. Well, as announced by the British Chancellor, the cancellation of part of the debt is to be financed by a reduction of the development aid, and therefore the remedy will only worsen the disease. Moreover, as our comrades tell us, such “generous decisions” are often qualified by a precondition to privatize the education and health system, to open public and social services to the multinationals, which will only worsen the situation of the majority of the population. Meanwhile, multinationals continue to plunder natural resources (precious metals, diamonds, etc) fomenting internal tribal wars, precluding the way towards real development.

In Latin America the situation continues to change with ever greater resistance to US domination. Of course, the Bush administration continues to tighten the blockade against Cuba, it does not miss an opportunity to try and get President Chavez out of power, it intensifies its efforts to impose the Plan Colombia on several countries and to transform the entire continent by means of the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas FTAA into a market for US products and cheap labour. Allow me on behalf of the UITBB to salute our comrades from Venezuela, ambassadors of their working people, and ambassadors of the Bolivarian revolution, which together with the Cuban revolution enjoys tremendous support and solidarity among the working people, in particular the young generation all over the world. It is obvious that the people in LA have decided not to accept any further US domination and to reject the FTAA. The ALBA project promoted by Cuba and Venezuela, programs for changes in Uruguay, Argentina, the election of president Lula in Brazil, recent developments in Peru and Colombia, everywhere we can see workers and their Unions on the march. And I am proud to say that building and wood workers unions most of them affiliated with our UITBB and Flemacon, are in the frontline for democratic change. They are determined to rid themselves of US imperialist presence, to decide themselves how to integrate and develop their economies, to recover full sovereignty over their natural resources. The Latin American continent, which has seen the birth and hosted several World Social Forums, is showing the world that it is possible to rise against neo-liberalism, that united class-based struggle can challenge capitalism.

In Europe, dear Comrades, the political and economic elite (and also part of the trade union establishment) is still in a state of shock over the French and Dutch “NO” vote to the European Constitution. Close to 80 percent of the French workers voted No, and it is clear to everybody in the EU today, that most of the so-called old member countries would have voted NO, if the people would have been given a chance. The neo-liberal nature of the Constitution is no longer a secret, although the rulers of Europe portrayed it as a major achievement and step forward towards a citizens’ Europe. In reality it is a credo of neo-liberal capitalism, preaching privatization of health and education systems, opening social services to private market forces, encouraging competition between national and migrant workers, and undermining present rights and benefits. It reinforces the militaristic nature of the EU connecting it closely to NATO, and it is totally undemocratic in the way in which it has been elaborated and approved. It is intended to make Europe into the greatest deregulated market in the world, a free play ground for capital and the big multinationals.

The workers of Europe have rejected this document and yet Europe’s rulers have not abandoned it. In this connection one cannot but wonder why the ETUC had spoken so strongly in favour of the acceptance of the EU Constitution, without consulting its rank and file, those whom it concerns most. Is it so that the trade unions elite is alienated from the reality of European workers, that it is too deeply involved with the industrial and political elite in Europe? Is it so that at continent level some trade union organizations have become huge non-governmental organizations managing often State or EU funded projects, whereas the workers’ situation continues to deteriorate? How can a trade union organization speak in favour of a document, which is neo-liberal and militaristic by nature? There is a slanderous campaign going on trying to argue that French and Dutch workers took a privileged position against Polish plumbers, the Polish plumbers being the generic expression for immigrant workers. The reality is that in saying NO to the Constitution, French workers expressed their rejection of the fact that Polish or any other migrant workers be paid less than French workers, that they must enjoy the same rights and benefits and not be used to undermine national standards. The so-called social dialogue in Europe has not saved a single job, has not prevented any transfer or closing down of an industrial plant. Workers and Unions in Europe have now the opportunity to develop a real alternative to the neo-liberal development of Europe. The NO vote has opened up the doors for a positive change. It remains to be seen whether this opportunity will be seized.

As for our UITBB, the situation described clearly shows that neo-liberal globalization and capitalism do not offer a solution to the most urgent economic, social and environmental problems standing before humanity today. The working class is facing unprecedented unemployment and hardships on all continents: the concentration of the world’s wealth in the hands of a few is in contradiction with the real needs of humanity. Therefore, the international trade union movement of which our UITBB is part must promote a different way of development, ban war as a means of making politics, promote a global economy protecting and developing public services, recognizing the collective ownership over land, water, air, forests, respecting the biodiversity of the planet – in short come forward with alternative solutions to capitalism. Obviously the international trade union movement has not given the appropriate response to the brutal offensive of big business and many Unions are loosing membership (e.g. in Europe). It is against this background that recent developments must be seen, such as the forthcoming amalgamation of the ICFTU and the WCL and consequently at our branch level the merger between the IFBWW and the WFWC.

Our UITBB has repeatedly launched calls for united action of all construction and wood workers’ unions regardless of their affiliation. Sometimes our voice has been heard – e.g. at the World Asbestos Congress in Tokyo in March – the 3 internationals passed a joint statement demanding a ban asbestos. We would have wished the same unity around our initiative of 9 September – the Day of Action against Canada’s exports of asbestos. But we are happy to announce to you that the Day of Action turned out to be an unprecedented success. Some twenty cities witnessed marches and

protest actions against asbestos production and Canada's export of this killer fibre to developing countries, showing utter contempt for the health and life of workers and populations of the receiving countries. When our Executive Committee took this decision we could not imagine that workers in the poorest countries – Niger, Togo, Senegal, Chile, etc. – would take to the street, wearing t-shirts with the name of the UITBB and the slogan STOP CANADIAN EXPORTS OF ASBESTOS. Our affiliates from Togo wrote to us that they wish to continue the campaign, it had a tremendous awareness raising effect among workers, including those who work in the wood industry and are faced with dust and have no respiratory mask provided for by their employers. I could give many more examples, but it seems to me that the success of this action offers the international trade union movement the possibility to take a qualitative step forward, going beyond mere statements and often lip service to achieve mobilising actions involving workers. We have already launched a call to pursue this action and we hope that this time all construction workers unions can unite behind this fundamental demand. The same unity would be required at the ILO to protect existing standards and obtain new ones, to impose the implementation of the standards, to work out a status for migrant workers protecting them against modern slavery, to improve the health and safety regulations and to ensure their actual implementation, to oppose ever increasing flexibility of working conditions demanded by employers, etc. United action and mutual respect is a precondition of advances in the national and international struggles. We believe that in view of the unprecedented aggression of capitalism, the trade union movement needs a strong commitment to ideological, political and organic rethinking so as to become an efficient tool to fight exploitation and oppression. It must take on board its fundamental principles, namely the independence of the working class (blue and white colours), trade union democracy involving the rank and file, unity, solidarity and internationalism. Reversing the present trend and successfully combating injustice and exploitation will only be possible from a clear-based position, supporting workers and people everywhere in active struggles for a better world.

Dear Comrades and Friends,

As secretary of the UITBB it is my duty and pleasure to express the sincere gratitude of our Secretariat, of our entire organization to the CFMEU Construction Division, to you and your workers for the continuous support and for your active solidarity. You can't imagine how important and encouraging it is for UITBB member unions in Latin America, in Africa, in the Middle East, in Asia and in Europe to know that they belong to the same workers' family as the CFMEU, that they can count on active support for their struggles. In fact, the CFMEU has always been and will always be among the first Unions to react to an international or national call for solidarity.

Last but not least, I could not end this speech without expressing the most sincere thanks of the UITBB to your National Secretary and our President John Sutton. Since his election in 2002, our organisation and therefore trade union action in our sector has made a big step forward under John's leadership, our membership has increased and we look with confidence towards our 14th Congress, which will be held in September 2006 in Greece.

In conclusion let me thank you again for the invitation and wish you well in your important deliberations. Long live workers' international solidarity!

Rino Gelmi, UITBB Secretary
17 October, 2005