

International Unions Embrace the World Social Forum: Opportunities and...*Limitations?*

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The International Trade Union Confederation has issued a statement that publicly endorses the World Social Forum's Day of Action, 2008 (**Appendix A**). This is a remarkable turnaround for the 19th-20th century movement that in 1995 was offended to be kept off the platform at the UN's Social Summit and treated as simply another element of civil society. Since then labour's global crisis has only deepened, with jobs moved or destroyed, unions being smashed, marginalized, or ignored by aggressive, expansive capital, backed by nation-states and the international financial institutions.

Although the ITUC and its forerunners (which merged late-2006) have increasingly attended events of the WSF at both global and lower levels, attendance has not previously been marked by such an appeal. The event now being promoted is the WSF's Global Day of Action, January 26, 2008. This day, intended to take place locally but worldwide, substitutes for the customary five-day event concentrated in specific Third World cities.

Previously the union internationals have attended the WSF but tended to hold their own mini-events before, or to keep to their own tents or areas within the more general Forum. They have not been notable for mixing or merging with others present. In Nairobi, early-2006, they promoted 'Decent Work' as if this was the single answer to world labour's multiple problems. Indeed, ITUC's Kenyan affiliate even confronted the WSF preparatory committee, trying to force WSF adoption of the slogan as a condition of union attendance.

Yet Decent Work is not even a union initiative. It comes from the United Nations' labour body, the International Labour Organisation. And what it seems to aim at is that the world of work should return to a past utopia –the West European capitalist welfare state of the second half of the 20th century. Given globalization, this implies a global 'social partnership'. In both form and content Decent Work reveals international labour's continuing dependence on benign powers above. Such dependency is in some tension with the spirit of the WSF, more inclined to building up autonomous power from below.

For 2008, the ITUC is still promoting Decent Work. But no longer as the single possible labour issue. Indeed, it seems to be recognizing the value of the WSF's notion of 'open space'. Member unions are encouraged to dialogue with the other parties present at

the Global Day of Action. They are expected to present their own particular ideas and interests, whilst not forgetting the ITUC's main concerns: Decent Work, Union Rights and Fair Trade. Unions are, moreover, being encouraged to exchange information and ideas on-line, both amongst themselves and with other WSF participants. The event may thus see some global labour discussion about global labour strategies.

If, previously, the ITUC has appeared to have had just one cautious toe in the somewhat stormy waters of the WSF, it now appears to be either extending a foot, or even jumping in with two. In its closer embrace of the WSF it is following the example of many otherwise cautious international non-governmental organizations. Within the euphoric atmosphere of a global-civil-society-in-formation, such bodies meet up with militant and exotic others – with Feminists, Autonomists, Marxists, with ecologists, pacifists, the landless and indigenous rights activists. They also become familiar with a whole other way of relating to one another and of acting in face of the global hegemon.

Influence, however, works in two directions. One cannot make the assumption that the traditional international unions – profoundly wedded to incremental change and social-partnership (i.e. a partnership with *capital*) – are going to be converted to the root-and-branch anti-capitalism represented by more radical Forum forces. Things could just as easily – indeed more easily – move in the other direction. This means that radical WSF movements could simply accept the unions as representing *all* of world labour whilst, in fact, only 10-20 percent of the world's workers are in ITUC-affiliated unions.

The world of work, in this century, is a very different one than the ITUC - or the WSF - has so far been able to meaningfully represent. The Chinese working class, for example, is, on any definition, larger than the total membership of the ITUC. This vast and varied class has been in a condition of repeated rebellion over the past few years. Yet it so far has no more than a distant, mediated or marginal voice in either the ITUC or the WSF. Then there is the growing global force of the sub-contracted, the 'informalised' or 'self-employed' labour force, some at the high end, some at the low end of the labour market. This differentiated category - sometimes called the 'precariat' - is commonly beyond the reach of or not motivated to join the unions designed for traditional worker types. The precariat also has no significant presence at the WSF. Then there are the millions of women and migrant workers (and the migrant women workers). Yet women homeworkers and streetworkers are increasingly self-organised internationally. And immigrants, as in the USA, have shown themselves to be as or more militant than native unionized workers.

The ITUC embrace of the WSF remains a profoundly ambiguous affair. It is, however, something new in union history and something therefore to be both watched and engaged with. The union internationals may still be in crisis. But labour activists might do well to remember that the Chinese hieroglyph for crisis combines those for danger and opportunity. More modestly one could perhaps speak here about opportunities and limitations.

[Peter Waterman (London 1936) is a veteran commentator on labour and social movement internationalism, based in The Hague. Some of his most recent writings are listed below. He can be most easily found on the web by Googling <peter waterman the hague>]

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Appendix A

[http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/No_58_WSF -
_Global_Day_of_Action_January_26_2008.pdf](http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/No_58_WSF_-_Global_Day_of_Action_January_26_2008.pdf)

In reply please quote:
Circular N° 58(2007)

To all affiliated organisations
To all Global Union Federations

For information:
To all General Council Members

ESP/CC 28 November 2007

World Social Forum (WSF) Global Day of Action January 26, 2008

Dear Friends,

For several years the international trade union movement has been involved in the World Social Forum (WSF) which brings together many civil society organisations and networks under the slogan "Another World Is Possible". You may recall that the first three Forums were organised in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the fourth (2004) in Mumbai, India and the

fifth (2005) again in Porto Alegre, while in January 2006 “polycentric” Forums took place simultaneously in Venezuela, Mali and Pakistan. In January 2007 there was significant trade union involvement in the Forum held in Nairobi, Kenya.

During its evolution, the Forum has become a productive location for social actors to meet and interact. The “open space” character of the WSF offers the opportunity for trade unions to communicate their positions, exchange ideas and find convergence with other organisations and networks sharing our values and objectives.

For 2008, the International Committee (IC) of the WSF - of which the ITUC is a member - has decided to organise a Global Day of Mobilisation and Action, in place of one global meeting. It will be held on 26 January, 2008. The objective of the WSF Global Day of Action is for each member of the WSF to interact with friendly organisations, networks and movements, leaving it up to each actor to decide on the topic and the form of their mobilisation.

As a member of the IC, the ITUC is taking part in the WSF Global Day and in order to make sure that trade union viewpoints are heard on January 26, we encourage your organisation to take actions on that day and to share those actions with allied organisations and networks. You will find more information on the WSF webpages:

<http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br> and <http://www.wsf2008.net>

Although it is up to you to decide on specific issues and activities, the ITUC would propose in particular that you give consideration to the following themes:

1. Call to Action for Decent Work, Decent Life

At the last WSF in January 2007, the ITUC launched the “Decent Work for Decent Life” campaign with its civil society partners, as reported in ITUC Circular No. 15 (2007). Promoting the effective implementation of decent work and its integration into national, regional and international agendas is the best way to reverse the worldwide trend towards the expansion of precarious work. As reported in ITUC Circular No. 54 (2007), the ITUC and Global Unions’ campaign on Decent Work, Decent Life for Women due to start on March 8, 2008 offers opportunities to call against the discrimination endured by women at the workplace and in the labour market.

In order to increase international support for the decent work agenda, the ITUC with its partners recently launched the Call to Action for Decent Work, Decent Life (see website for more information at <http://www.decentwork.org>), which is the subject of a separate ITUC

circular. We would like to encourage your organisation to use January 26, 2008 to disseminate information about the Call to Action, including its gender dimensions, and to collect signatures and support for this campaign.

2. Respect for trade union rights

There remains an appalling level of brutal violence meted out to many workers worldwide merely because their trade unions have tried to stand up for the rights to democracy, to decent work, to fair pay or to acceptable working conditions. Human and trade union rights are severely violated in Burma, Colombia, Guatemala, Zimbabwe, Guinea and Iran, to name but a few. Workers are murdered due to their trade union activities in every single continent. In addition, trade unions rights are massively violated in those sectors where the majority of workers are women. We would encourage you to make respect for trade union rights a theme of your activities on January 26 and to use the occasion to ensure people know of the gravity of the situation in so many parts of the world and especially in the countries mentioned above.

3. Fair trade rules in multilateral and bilateral agreements

International trade should help to reduce inequalities among and within countries and so contribute to a better standard of living for workers everywhere and an end to poverty. Trade must sustain and not impede the development of the poorest countries. Women workers are often the direct victims of unfair trade rules, such as best illustrated by their situation in Export Processing Zones (EPZ). Trade unions are concerned that often trade does not fulfil the aspiration of workers, and consider it vital to change and reorient the world trading system so as to achieve social justice, respect for workers' rights and decent work, economic and social development and quality public services. This area of work needs to form another part of the themes you promote on January 26. In developing your activities for the WSF Global Day of Action, we recommend that your organisation take full account of the gender dimension and ensure that women's rights and interests are highly visible in your activities.

We have established a list-serve for the exchange of information between trade unions interested in WSF activities, global-unions-wsf@forum.ituc-csi.org. If you have not yet subscribed to this list, please do so by sending an e-mail to lyris@forum.ituc-csi.org with the message "Subscribe global-unions-wsf". We would encourage you to use that list actively in order to keep the ITUC and other trade unions around the world informed of your plans and activities for the WSF Global Day of Action.

If you wish to receive more information about the Day, please contact the ITUC at wsf-fsm@ituc-csi.org

Yours sincerely,

General Secretary

Document link:

[http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/No_58_WSF -
_Global_Day_of_Action_January_26_2008.pdf](http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/No_58_WSF_-_Global_Day_of_Action_January_26_2008.pdf)