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WORLD CONFEDERATION OF LABOUR

THE WCL CONFIRMS ITS INTEREST IN THE ARAB WORLD

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON THE ARAB PROBLEM

On 15 October, as a prelude to the ACV-CSC Congress and its international symposium, the World Confederation of Labour (WCL) organised a symposium on trade unionism in the Arab world. In view of the current disturbing situation, the WCL thought it important and necessary to understand and explore the Arab world, to make this symposium a forum for analysis, debate and reflection. According to a large number of participants, this seminar of a new kind was a real success. There is good reason to believe that this will not be the last experience of the WCL in this area.

Thus prompted by a growing interest and a great political will the WCL, through the symposium, non only increased its own knowledge, but especially sought to demonstrate the strategies to be developed in this part of the world. The debates were of very high quality, enhanced notably by the presence of Bichara Khader, Director of the Centre for Studies and Research on the Contemporary Arab World (CERMAC) of the UCL (Université Catholique de Louvain) and Director of Studies of the Institute for the Study of Developing Countries. The Arab member unions of the WCL were also well represented. Mohammed Kabbajj of the UGTM (General Union of Moroccan Workers) and Mustapha Brahma of the CDT (Democratic Labour Confederation), recalled the struggle being undertaken by their two Moroccan trade organisations for the defence of the workers' interests. A reflection on trade unionism and the Arab world was also on the agenda. The participants in the symposium were also able to count on the experience of Nouri Soukouti, adviser to the WCL.

CONCLUSIONS…

The economic and political situation of the Arab world

The seminar provided Bichara Khader with the opportunity to give an overview of the Arab world from the geopolitical and economic viewpoint. He sought to demonstrate that to understand the complexity of this region, it is useful to analyse the different elements, which make up its history. Let us deal in particular with the most influential of them. First of all, it should be noted that history itself plays a role. «*It's an environment overloaded with history, almost crushed by it*». In fact, Arab civilisation has influenced and dominated a large part of the world. In view of the current situation, it is easy to understand that the Arab population has doubts about its future. A process of glorification of the past is thus almost inevitable. Next, as explained by the Director of the Centre for Studies and Research on the Arab world, the region that makes up the Arab world is a geostrategic link, a point of intersection between Europe, Asia and Africa. It is a truly key region, among others, for the oil route or passage for maritime, air or land navigation. It is therefore not surprising that the major powers, notably the United States, have wanted to control the region. In addition to this geographical element, the Arab world has strategic resources, unfortunately very badly distributed (50% of the proven reserves of oil and 25% of the world gas production). Apart from Iraq, the reserves are distributed among the regions or countries with low population density. Another factor to be taken into account is that the popu-

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Responsible editor : Willy Thys
Information officer : Mathieu Debroux.

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WCL
Trierstraat 33
B-1040 Brussels
Tel : 02/285.47.00
Fax : 02/230.87.22
E-mail: info@cmt-wcl.org
Internet: www.cmt-wcl.org

lation growth has an undoubted effect on the labour front. Although on the decline in certain regions, it is still decisive. In concrete terms, in North Africa alone, we ought to create 800 000 new jobs a year. However, only 150 000 are actually created. The conclusion is evidently terrible: each year the Maghreb produces more than 600 000 unemployed persons. That is not all. The economic growth of Arab countries is dependent on factors that are difficult to control, be it rain for agriculture or fluctuations in the price of oil. Another element is that the Arab world is an area without effective regional institutions. In fact, politically speaking, despite the fact that the League of Arab States was established before the Treaty of Rome, it has not been able to prevent a large number of inter-Arab conflicts. Finally, let us talk about immigration. For several decades, migration has been part of Arab history. Without counting the three million migrants who have settled in Latin America for a long time already, there are not less than five million Palestinian, Lebanese, Syrian, Egyptian and Yemeni Arabs working in oil producing Arab countries. To these can be added the North Africans living in Europe.

New phenomenon of civil society

Civil society in the Arab world, according to Bichara Khader, has experienced a steady growth for over 30 years. In fact, while there were about 10 000 NGOs in 1970, this figure has today risen to 100 000.
Although a good many of these associations are still «*used as instruments*» by the States which balk at seeing the public sector out of their control, others, which are autonomous and democratic, are very effective. The Arab civil society, a factor essential for the development of democracy, creates participatory, cooperative and tolerant habits and as Mr Khader further emphasises, «*states must make concessions to meet the social demand and external pressures*».

Trade unionism and the Arab world

During the second part of the Symposium devoted to trade unionism in the Arab world, Mustapha Brahma, of the CDT (Morocco), Mohammed Kabbaj, of the UGTM (Morocco), and Nouri Soukouti, adviser to the WCL, were able to share their experience with us.
From what they said, the WCL has many assets in hand to exploit trade unionism in this region of the world. First, the historic sensitivity that the WCL has for the Arab world. Next, the common vision that the World Confederation of Labour and the Arab world share with regard to neo-liberal globalisation. The trade union movement had been developed in the context of national liberation, our union friends stressed. That is an explanation of the fact that the links between trade unions and public authorities are still very strong today. In certain countries, the trade unions are non-existent. In the Gulf, for instance, commissions were created, under pressure from the ILO, to make up for this gap.

The Arab world, a strategic area

As we have indicated above, owing to its enormous oil reserves, the Arab world notably is an important strategic region. Without, of course, being anti-American, we cannot accept the threats of war that the United States is making against Iraq. The WCL believes that rather than investing in war, it would be better to invest in development. In fact, if the developed countries spent more effort on development, there would be a glimmer of hope for the most deprived countries. Moreover, the destabilisation of the Arab world, which could result from this war, would only reinforce the power of the multinational organisations and oil companies.

Support for the workers and people of Palestine

The WCL has always shown solidarity with the Palestinian workers and people in the struggle for their legitimate social and national rights.
The WCL is convinced that the main cause of violence and suffering of the Palestinian workers and people is the permanent violation of the United Nations resolutions, which stipulate the right of the Palestinian people to their own territory and state. The World Confederation of Labour condemns all forms of violence and makes an appeal for a just and lasting peace between Palestine and Israel. A just and lasting peace between Palestine and Israel can only contribute decisively to worldwide understanding, which is vital for building a world order based on peace, solidarity and social justice as foundations of real globalisation with a human face.Let us recall here the international solidarity campaign undertaken by the WCL and its International Solidarity Foundation (ISF) for the benefit of 410 Palestinian families in dire need.