

# Trade unionists: social diplomats?

**Alongside bread and freedom, peace has been one of the three main priorities of the international trade union movement since its earliest days.**

**The priority of peace and security is closely linked to the unions' struggles for democracy, respect for human rights, social justice and non-discrimination.**

**We will look at the daily work of trade unions as peacemakers, from Rwanda to the Balkans and in Colombia, Cyprus, Ireland and the Middle East. The work itself ranges from local to international activities and combines prevention and reconciliation.**

**We will focus on the transport and media sectors, which are in the front line in conflicts, and also on the key role played by women in driving the work forward.**

**We will also look at their weapons of combat: dialogue and solidarity.**

**W**hat can trade unions do in the face of an armed conflict, whether it be a conventional war between two countries, civil war or even acts of terrorism? This question was put to 30 trade unionists from Africa, Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and Central and Eastern Europe who came together in Brussels at the end of September 2003. The occasion was a seminar on "preventative social diplomacy", organised by three Belgian trade union confederations (FGTB, CSC, CGSLB), and the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs.

"It is clearly paradoxical: trade union organisations, so often accused of being responsible for social tensions, can play a major role in conflict prevention," Georges Vandersmissen, former regional secretary of the FGTB, pointed out at the seminar.

The simple fact of organising such a meeting made it possible to seat trade



*Some thirty trade unionists from across the world gathered in Brussels last September for a seminar on "preventive social diplomacy". (Photo: FGTB).*

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unionists from conflict zones side by side, such as the representatives of unions from Israel (Histradrut) and Palestine (PGFTU), or the Democratic Republic of the Congo (UNTC) and Rwanda (CESTRAR). Other unionists came from countries in the midst of civil war, such as Nepal, Colombia, Sri Lanka and Sierra Leone.

All those present, most from developing or transition countries, considered armed conflict to be "the expression of fundamental problems such as the unequal distribution of wealth, corruption, impunity, bad governance, neo-liberal policies imposed by international financial institutions and the WTO, other economic, political, social and cultural inequalities and human rights violations in general."

Jose Olivio Oliveira, Assistant General Secretary of the ICFTU, recalled that trade unions are "peace actors", since "peace... can only be based on social justice", in other words, the eradication of poverty, the fight for social inclusion and basic workers' rights. "The countries where the institutional participation of trade unions is greatest are also those where the level of conflict is the lowest," he continued, defending the right to strike as a basic principle for workers and of democracy.

In a report in February 2003, the World Bank itself pointed to the positive impact of trade unions on economic development and, in turn, on political stability.

#### EXPERIENCED ACTORS

While recognising that there is "no single model of conflict prevention", since no two conflicts are the same, all the trade unionists pointed out that they were experienced actors in the field of conflict management, as witnessed by the signing of millions of collective agreements negotiated by unions to improve workers' living and working conditions.

They also stressed the importance of regular cooperation, particularly through cross-border and inter-union exchanges, which can serve as an early warning system for conflicts, and the value of solidarity not only as a principle but also as a tool. In the Middle East, Palestinians working in Israel "form the bridge of peace", commented the General Secretary of the PGFTU, Shaher Sae'd. In East Africa, trade unionists are trying to form a Great Lakes inter-union group, bringing together unions from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Burundi. Their reconciliation was difficult but finally took place in February 2003 during a meeting organised by the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Belgian trade unions (see article p. 5).

Another way of preventing conflict is to form alliances with other members of civil society. One example is the joint efforts of transport unions and Amnesty International, which are cooperating on the issue of refugees who board ships or planes to flee from war in their own country. The International Transport Workers' Federation and Amnesty International are fighting against the fines placed on those transporting such refugees, and the consequent obligation placed on transport workers to take on the role of the police (see article page 10).

#### NON-DISCRIMINATION

All the trade unionists present underlined that only civil and non-violent action is capable of resolving conflicts, based on "genuine democratic participation, dialogue and consultation". In Colombia, trade unionists, who pay with their lives for the fact that violence is used as a means to resolve labour conflicts, are defending non-violent policies. In Africa, PRODIAF, an ILO programme for the promotion of dialogue in French-speaking Africa, providing training in negotiating techniques, has also attracted interest in political circles in the context of negotiations with warring parties. In Israel, the union centre Histradrut has launched a peace education programme for Israeli Jews and Palestinians in 2002.

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Finally, participants agreed on the need for an "active policy of non-discrimination", even within unions, as a way to resolve ethnic conflicts, for example, such as in the Balkans. In this respect, Jasna Petrovic, ICFTU coordinator of the CEE Women's Network, underlined the important role played by women in conflict resolution, and quoted a number of initiatives (women's groups, exchanges between experts, conferences) that have brought together Serbian and Croatian women or Albanian and Montenegrin women.

It was stressed, however, that trade unionists can only play their role fully if they enjoy the basic rights and freedoms guaranteed by the ILO conventions, and in particular those related to freedom of association and collective bargaining since effective action requires unions that are independent, democratic and representative. ●

ANNE RENAUT

## Cyprus: unions for unity



*The two leaders of the Türk-sen and SEK trade union organisations hand in hand at the May 1st rally in 2003.*

**The Pan-Cypriot Trade Union Forum, a structure set up in 1995 bringing together 16 Turkish- and Greek-Cypriot trade union organisations, including Türk-sen and SEK, which are both affiliated to the ICFTU.**

**T**he trade union forum, previously forced to meet abroad owing to obstacles to free movement between the two parts of the country, is calling for a political solution to reunite the island under the recent United Nations proposal (bicommunal and bizonal federation) which is supported by the European Union. It is also appealing for an economic structure to allow the freedom to work anywhere on the island, respect for freedom of association, and would prioritise eliminating social and economic inequalities between the two communities.

Inequalities between the north and south have intensified during the 29-year-old division that separated the Greek and Turkish parts of the island since Turkey's 1974 invasion of the northern third of the island.

In recent years, the ICFTU has frequently condemned the harassment inflicted upon unions and their members in the area controlled by the Turkish-Cypriot authorities, and lodged a complaint in 2002 to the ILO concerning the obstacles placed on the free movement of trade unionists. ●

N.D.

# Colombia: appeal for greater protection of trade unionists

**Analysis of the role of unions in the civil war, with Norberto Navarro, from the National Trade Union School of Colombia, and his appeal for international pressure.**

**W**ith its appalling toll of murders, beatings, "disappearances" and intimidation carried out with virtually total impunity, Colombia is the most dangerous place on earth for trade union activity, with 184 trade unionists killed in 2002 alone. The ICFTU, like many others in the international trade union movement, is unrelenting in its lobbying of the Colombian government and the relevant international authorities to bring an end to the killings of trade unionists as well as the impunity that prevails in the country with regard to human rights violations.

First, however, the origins of this crisis must be considered. *"Colombia is going through a profound political and social crisis that has been brought on by a variety of factors. One of them, of a clearly social nature, is the astounding poverty existing across the country. Another factor is the problem of political exclusion. Drug trafficking also plays a major role in this civil war,"* explains Norberto Navarro, who works for the National Trade Union School of Colombia.

As members of Colombian society, trade unionists are inevitably affected by this conflict. But in recent years, the unions have only associated themselves with civilian, non-violent political projects. *"The first role it can play in this conflict is to make a break with political projects founded on violence,"* confirms Norberto Navarro. *"Furthermore, union leaders can distance themselves from the armed movements in applying pressure or promoting their demands. Likewise, the unions can also play an active role in promoting a negotiated settlement to the conflict. The country is plagued with belligerence, which is present in high-level political spheres and many sectors of the population at large. Reaching a negotiated settlement involving the various sectors of society would give rise to a solid agreement with greater social justice and the integration of the various political forces."*

Despite their adherence to non-violent principles, trade unionists are nonetheless prime targets of violence. *"It is true that trade union leaders are victims of the hostility between the warring factions in Colombia, particularly the paramilitaries. They are also victims of the climate of violence; warfare is being used as a way to settle labour conflicts. In other words, labour conflicts are being militarised. They are not resolved like in democratic societies, through dialogue and tradi-*



*tional negotiating methods,"* adds Norberto Navarro.

## INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE

As a result of the pressure exerted by the international labour movement, human rights groups and the ILO, the Colombian state has been compelled to ensure the protection of the offices of trade union organisations and leaders. But the protection offered remains insufficient, given the high level of risk and the threats issued to trade union leaders by armed entities, particularly paramilitaries.

*"I see the international community's involvement in the conflict as being a very important thing for Colombia. Pressure must be exerted on the authorities to ensure greater protection of trade union leaders and the expression of trade unionism. But it is equally crucial that the international community address all the warring parties, to demand that they respect the freedom of the trade union movement and that they stop the climate of violence from stigmatising the movement and automatically linking it with the factions at war,"* emphasises Norberto Navarro. *"It is vital that the whole world be informed of the situation affecting Colombia's trade union movement, that pressure be exerted on the Colombian government and business circles to establish a culture of democracy, and on the warring parties, to respect the*

*right of trade unions and their leaders to act freely."* ●

A.R. AND N.D.

## Indonesia Teachers Victims of Violence

The international federation of education workers, Education International (EI), is seriously concerned about the situation of teachers in Indonesia, particularly in Aceh province. *"Aceh's education sector is completely devastated"* after clashes between rebels and the military, and the burning down of schools, wrote EI General Secretary Fred Van Leeuwen in a letter to Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri, dated 3 October 2003.

The violence and insecurity in the region has forced teachers and pupils to flee. According to EI, some children do not attend school at all, or are immediately put to work, and several teachers have been killed or seriously injured. Others have suffered severe traumas or have lost all their belongings.

EI is concerned about the growing number of human rights violations since the introduction in May 2003 of marshal law, and welcomes the creation of a National Committee on Human Rights, which is to hold a human rights enquiry in Aceh province. EI, along with the NGO Oxfam and other organisations involved in the Global Campaign for Education, have petitioned the warring factions to take every measure to end the violence against pupils, teachers and educational establishments. EI also wishes to see the implementation of the recommendations put forward by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Katarina Tomasevski, who, in 2002, advocated that complete stock should be taken of human rights obligations in this sector.

A.R.



# Rwanda: showing the way to reconciliation

**How Rwanda's unions managed to heal the wounds of the 1994 genocide that claimed more than 500,000 lives.**

**Social welfare, wage increases, educational work... Eric Manzi, General Secretary of the ICFTU-affiliated Confederation of Trade Unions of Rwanda (CESTRAR) tells of a range of reconciliation efforts carried out on the ground in Rwanda.**

**Eric Manzi:** *In 1995, just after the genocide, when the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front) had come to power, we improved workers' social well-being by setting up a social pharmacy system enabling workers to obtain medicine or drugs at a reasonable price, compared with those charged at other pharmacies. We also set up a trade union cooperative store system, where workers who had not been paid at all or received their full salary could come and stock up on provisions after receiving loans that were to be paid back once their salaries had been transferred to their accounts. The social pharmacies and trade union cooperative store helped us get our Workers' Fund up and running again. Today, that fund has evolved into a kind of micro-financing bank with its own legal status, and is working well. The priority during that entire period was to provide relief, and by acting as it did, CESTRAR helped the government kick-start the economy again and ensure that workers at least had enough to survive.*

*A second phase involved making demands. It was impossible at a time like that to claim exorbitant pay rises. All we could do was ask that salaries be increased by at least 50%. In 1996, we succeeded not only in prompting the government to award a 20% pay rise, but also a lump-sum housing and transport allowance, mainly for civil servants, as well as inducing it to launch a mutual health insurance company to which workers contribute 5% of their salary.*

*We also took part in the review of the Labour Code, which was no longer suited to the context of globalisation and structural adjustment, and launched a campaign to boost the recognition of the trade union movement in an attempt to ensure that unions are recognised as key partners in both social and economic terms.*

● What are you doing to prevent ethnic rivalries from being rekindled?



Eric Manzi, General Secretary of the Confederation of Trade Unions of Rwanda (CESTRAR)

*We unions were the first to lead by example. Both Hutu and Tutsi people got the trade union movement up and running again. Even in the various governing bodies it was only natural to bring Hutus and Tutsis together, without applying quotas like those currently in force in government circles. Indeed, people were selected on the basis of what they could do, not their ethnic origins.*

*The message we sent out to politicians was a very strong one in favour of reconciliation. This determination to transcend all ethnic differences, which serve no purpose whatsoever, is something that even the general public is picking up on now.*

*Furthermore we are involved in mechanisms of reconciliation. Apart from our traditional work with respect to teaching workers, we have also incorporated civics into the education we give them, not just covering human rights and trade union rights, but also working such topics into our appraisal of good governance, reconciliation, justice, and so forth. This is our unions' contribution to prevention, because the ethnic problem was more a question of poor education and bad governance.*

*On top of this, we are trying to prevent social conflicts by engaging in a constructive dialogue with the Ministry of Labour, for a*

*social conflict could hamper the government's current efforts to promote reconciliation, which could in turn bring us back to square one. People will still take the ethnic aspect into consideration, but very often this will be in protest at the social situation. It is in this direction that we are trying to nudge the dialogue. On 1 August 2003 we officially launched our social dialogue programme, which will soon bear fruit in the establishment of a National Labour Council. This, combined with the new Labour Code, constitutes a major step down the path of prevention.*

● The new President of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, was elected on 25 August after receiving 95% of the vote. Does that result bother you?

*During the current phase of democratisation, we have shied away from entering into any profound political debates, not just to maintain our independence, but also to retain our neutrality, because to begin with we intend to remain observers of the political process. It was difficult for us not to enter into the political debate, but we think we did the right thing; it was our silent contribution to democratisation. After all, a certain degree of political stability is a prerequisite for social well-being.*

*Our work entails civic education, the aim being to explain democratic principles, good governance and the benefits of decentralised power. The general public still needs to be educated and trained to enable workers to take part in free, democratic elections in the future.*

*At first sight it was a frightening result, but part of the explanation for it resides in the fact that there was one strong figure running against a bunch of first-time candidates. These were the country's first democratic elections, so we are not very concerned. However, a great deal remains to be done on the socio-economic front, and it is there that we intend to put up our main fight.* ●

INTERVIEW BY A.R.

# Great Lakes inter-union group for peace

**Anne-Marie Mambombe**, assistant general secretary of the national union of Congolese workers, UNTC, of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), tell us how the trade unions from two countries at war, DRC and Rwanda, managed to make their peace. They now plan to set up a Great Lakes inter-union group with their counterparts from Burundi, in an effort to contribute to peace in the region.

● What was the attitude of the Congolese unions to the civil war? (\*)

*The trade unions tried to hold general meetings to raise awareness among the general public. The trade unions did not want arms, as we see dialogue as being essential. I remember we placed a banner in front of our building asking those in power to resolve the problem through dialogue. It was not easy to convey this type of message as the authorities were absolutely determined to use arms, given that Rwanda, a small country, had invaded and defeated the Congo. It was an affront, and using arms was their way of avenging that affront.*

● Were Congolese unions able to talk with the unions in the neighbouring countries?

**W**e became the ambassadors of peace, as we explained to people why we should not hate the Rwandans, because Rwanda's ordinary working people have nothing to do with this war.

*They had managed to convince everyone that the Rwandans were bad, that they had invaded our country and humiliated us. It won over the entire population, even the children. We in the unions were also taken in by this picture of things.*

*In May 2002, the Congolese and Rwandan trade unions met up in Belgium. The day we met them was a shock. We entered the hotel lobby and found the Rwandans there. Everyone reacted. Some said that we should not greet them. But others said it would not be right, because as trade unionists we could not refuse to shake hands with the other party. So the days went by like that, full of hypocrisy.*

*Then we had a meeting with the Belgian*



Anne-Marie Mambombe, assistant general secretary of the national union of Congolese workers, UNTC: the regions' trade unionists want to be "ambassadors of peace".

*Minister of Foreign Affairs, which was an opportunity to talk. But the only thing that came out that day was poison. It was by no means easy.*

● You needed a second meeting to make peace...

*Belgium then organised a meeting of trade unions in February 2003. The discussions were very hard. We had to restart the process from scratch. Then things began to evolve when we realised that the Rwandans did not know why they were at war on our territory. We realised that we had grown to hate the Rwandans even though the ordinary people had nothing to do with this war. As soon as we had understood the other party, we started to moderate our posi-*

*tion. We felt the need to work together to reconcile our peoples.*

*We became the ambassadors of peace, as we explained to people why we should not hate the Rwandans, because Rwanda's ordinary working people have nothing to do with this war. And it is the same message given by our colleagues in Rwanda.*

● At what stage are you with the project to create a Great Lakes inter-union group?

*By the end of the second meeting in 2003 we were all delighted. That evening, we celebrated our reconciliation and came up with the idea of establishing an interregional structure, a Great Lakes inter-union group.*

*The three parties (trade unions from Burundi, DRC and Rwanda) are already in possession of a framework document, and we hope to obtain funding to take the process further. It may not necessarily be an inter-union group but a structure where we could meet and discuss peace in our sub-region.*

*Sharing experiences could be a great help in pursuing our initiative, because the hate for Rwandans has affected children, and if we do not carry out activities at the level of the general population, we run the risk of finding ourselves in the same situation as Israel and Palestine. It is time to act. ●*

INTERVIEW BY ANNE RENAUT

(\*) Since 1998, Kabila's army (backed by Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia) is at war with several rebel groups (backed by Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi).

# Northern Ireland: Preserving a fragile peace through workers dialogue

**The ICTU has set up an organisation that runs workplace meetings aimed at defusing tension and wiping out prejudice between Catholic and Protestant workers.**

The ongoing conflict between the Catholic and Protestant communities of Northern Ireland has already claimed 3,000 lives and tens of thousands of victims. The historic Good Friday Agreement, concluded in April 1998, brought renewed hope for peace and reconciliation and yet, five years on, paramilitary groups have still not been fully disarmed. Tensions and mistrust still run high between the Catholic and Protestant communities, both in urban residential areas and schools, where they keep their distance from one another, as well as in the workplace. In 1990, in the face of such sectarianism, the ICFTU-affiliated Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) set up "Counteract", an organisation that aims to root out workplace harassment among workers belonging to different communities. One of Counteract's main activities is to run workplace seminars, to smooth the path of dialogue between Catholic and Protestant workers.

"Society in Northern Ireland is very divided", explains Counteract Director, Billy Robinson. We are divided according to our birthplace, the place where we live, where we go to school, where we go out, etc. The only place where we cannot avoid coming together is in the workplace. It is a place that has immense potential in terms of the influence it can exert. If we are able to reach out to the workers and influence them, we can reach out to all their respective communities". Compared with the past, there are substantially less cases of physical violence and direct intimidation between Catholic and Protestant workers, but distrust and slander continue to affect many workplaces, leading to a lack of communication and co-operation between workers... therefore making the companies less profitable. This economic argument, in addition to the legal obligation for companies to address equality issues (those that do not do so risk prosecution), have convinced a growing number of companies in Northern Ireland to call on the services of Counteract. Some even call on



Billy Robinson, Counteract Director

the organisation repeatedly, to help them change their corporate culture.

Billy Robinson always starts his work with a company by first visiting the workplace, to fully take in the working environment, then goes on to meet with the executives. "These are the first people that need to be made aware. We explain the legislation to them, the ways they can investigate if a complaint is lodged, but we also confront them with their own prejudices, so that they fully understand how the workers feel in given situations. Then we address the union representatives, with whom we concentrate less on the legal aspects and more on the psychological aspects, through little exercises on their prejudices, how they have been influenced, how workers from the other community may be made to feel in a given working environment, etc. If they are not given any outside help it is difficult for workers' representatives to know how to deal with intimidation between Catholics and Protestants in the workplace." The training sessions are held in small groups of 16 people at the most, from the two communities, so that each has a chance to express him or herself.

The unions always try to avoid getting involved in the debate between the

Catholic and Protestant communities, to preserve the unity of the workers. As it is a separate entity from the trade unions, Counteract has a voice of its own, and is less afraid of "putting its foot in it"; it is able to take a frank and direct approach in its meetings with the workers from the different communities. "We all have to confront our prejudices, our negative opinions of the workers from the different communities, without hiding, without trying to make out that we are 'neutral', because everyone has an opinion about what is happening in Northern Ireland, and that includes the trade unionists and our facilitators," explains the director of Counteract. "Unions are made up of members who form part of society, and certain of those members are sectarian, or even support paramilitary groups."

**"I come from a Catholic part of Belfast, but consider myself an agnostic. It is a difficult thing for people to accept at present... In Belfast, I'm asked whether I'm a Catholic agnostic or a Protestant agnostic"**  
(Peter Bunting, Assistant General Secretary of the ICTU).

Counteract is also working with groups other than workers, such as prisoners, police officers, young people, the authorities, etc. In the longer term, Counteract hopes to create a more consensual environment within Northern Irish society as a whole, and particularly in the capital, Belfast. "Belfast is very divided," points out Billy Robinson, "The east of the town is Protestant, the west Catholic. People from west Belfast would rather apply for a job in the Middle East or the Far East than in east Belfast. The welcome messages of certain companies in one or the other area are not enough to diminish the fears. A whole new corporate culture is needed, one that is open to diversity, that can overcome stereotypes, etc. To achieve that, we also need to talk about diversity at school, from the earliest possible age, but teachers are not trained to deal with such issues. ●

SAMUEL GRUMIAU



# Middle East: trade unions supporting each other

**Two of the ICFTU affiliates in the Middle East, the Israeli Histadrut and the Palestinian PGFTU, can no longer meet each other in their own countries. However a cautious dialogue between the two organisations still continues. On the ground, the trade union organisations are very concerned at the worsening economic situation in Israel and the explosion of poverty in the Palestinian territories.**

**"P**ace and the right to sovereignty for both peoples are the key to economic and social development and the ending of the severe economic crisis", maintains the ICFTU which, along with Histadrut and the PGFTU, supports the "road map" aimed at creating a Palestinian State within three years. With this in mind, the ICFTU has pledged its support to help the Israeli and Palestinian trade union movements consolidate their dialogue and cooperation.

However both organisations admit that the situation has considerably worsened in recent months and that it has no longer even been possible to hold meetings between Histadrut and the PGFTU within the borders of Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

Despite this, representatives of Histadrut and the PGFTU came together at a seminar on the theme of "social preventive diplomacy" organised by the Belgian trade unions in September 2003. They discussed key issues such as the economic hardships faced by workers in the region.

The two confederations have also been trying to hold their own seminars with the assistance of the ICFTU and the ILO, as well as other union organisations such as LO-Denmark, LO-Norway, the Belgian unions and the Italian CISL.

## POVERTY

"The current situation provides little hope for Palestinians", according to PGFTU General Secretary Mr. Shaher Sae'd, who says Palestinians are living a human "tragedy". According to the ILO, over 60% of the population in the Territories lives in poverty, surviving on less than 2 dollars per day, compared to 21% in 1999, 33% in 2000, and 46% in 2001. According to the PGFTU, 5,000 Palestinians have been killed by the Israeli army or settlers since hostilities resumed in September 2000, and 50,000 have been injured, of whom 9,000 were seriously injured. Some 20,000 buildings, including schools and factories, have been partially damaged or completely destroyed.

Some 400,000 workers amongst an active population of 850,000 have lost their jobs. These include 200,000 Pales-

tinians who have worked in Israel or in the new cross-border industrial zones. "These workers formed a bridge of peace and represented an open door for mutual understanding between the two peoples. They earned 5 million dollars a day, which represents a huge loss to the Palestinian economy, now totally dependent on the Israeli economy", explains Mr. Sae'd. In addition, the construction of the wall by the Israeli government "has destroyed Palestinian land and caused huge losses to farmers". People can no longer move freely owing to the 10,000 roadblocks between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, together with the sieges and curfews in certain towns.

**A**ccording to the ILO, over 60% of the population in the Territories lives in poverty, surviving on less than 2 dollars per day, compared to 21% in 1999, 33% in 2000, and 46% in 2001.

According to the PGFTU, some 5,600 workers have been arrested on their way to work and held for between 1 and 3 months by the Israeli army or police, others have had to pay fines of between 200 and 300 dollars. Some 3,000 workers have been detained and beaten at border controls and many have complained to the Israeli police but to no avail.

Against this background, trade union activity has been largely sporadic. The PGFTU experienced difficulties in holding its congress, initially planned for 24 and 25 August 2003, but subsequently delayed until 13 and 14 September, and then postponed again owing to the closure of the borders.

## ECONOMIC PROBLEMS

On the Israeli side the situation has worsened by the day. The government has cut social benefits and wages and unemployment rose above 10% in 2003 for the first time in 35 years. The growth rate is 0% this year, compared

with 4 to 6% per year during years of peace.

Histadrut held a general strike on 3 November in protest at the government's decision to manage the pension funds of public service workers, which previously were partly managed by the union. The strike also protested the Treasury's plan to use a parliamentary vote to impose a unilateral ban on collective agreements.

Furthermore "the war has led the Israeli government to recruit foreign workers, sometimes illegally; these new workers now total 300,000 and are taking away the jobs of Palestinians and Israelis. This is why unemployment is rising. And unemployed workers do not pay their union fees," explains Mr. Nawaf Massalha.

"If there was peace it would be easier to sign agreements on the working conditions for Palestinian workers, or to set up economic projects on the border". ●

ANNE RENAUT

## Agreement between the PGFTU and Histadrut in 1995

In March 1995, an historic agreement was signed between the Israeli confederation Histadrut and its Palestinian counterpart the PGFTU. It provided that 50% of the union dues paid to Histadrut by Palestinians working in Israel would be transferred to Palestinian trade unions whilst the other half would be used by Histadrut to defend Palestinians working in Israel. It had been the Israeli government which was responsible for paying the money to the PGFTU, but it stopped doing so when hostilities resumed in September 2000. The PGFTU-Histadrut agreement also provided for the creation of a Joint Liaison Committee to address the problems facing Palestinians working legally in Israel.

# Non-discrimination, a trade union priority for the prevention of armed conflicts

**What lessons can be learned from the recent armed conflicts in the Balkans?**

**For Jasna A. Petrovic, a member of the Croatian union UATUC and the ICFTU CEE Women's Network Coordinator, non-discrimination issues must be the number one priority in the trade union approach to conflict prevention.**

● How have the armed conflicts in the Balkans highlighted the gaps in the trade unions' fight against discrimination?

*Unions fight for social justice, so when they fail to protect just one member of the union against discrimination based on ethnicity, political beliefs, race, religion, etc., they open the door to conflict. This is what happened in the recent armed conflicts in the Balkans. Unfortunately, at the beginning, the unions became part of the war rather than the peaceful solution. Even before the war broke out in Croatia, a number of Serbian trade unions from Serbia were involved in organising a separatist, single ethnicity trade union. Similarly, Croatian unions failed to react properly when the mass lay-offs of ethnic Serb workers commenced. Trade unions must take on board their past behaviour and make non-discrimination policies and conflict prevention strategies their number one priority.*

● How, in concrete terms, have the region's trade unions put the resolve to fight discrimination into practice?

*The most important conference, attended by many unionists from the region, was held in Herceg-Nov, Montenegro, in December 2001. It was there that the non-discrimination project was launched. Then, a conference in Skopje, Macedonia, in March 2003, finally set the issue of non-discrimination as a trade union priority. It is still only a small step forward, but at least the issue has been brought out in to the open.*

● What else have unions from the region done to contribute to peace?

*My confederation, the UATUC, played an active role in organising and assisting with humanitarian aid for the refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992-1994. In 1994, in Luxembourg, the UATUC Presi-*



Jasna A. Petrovic, member of the Croatian union UATUC and the ICFTU CEE Women's Network Coordinator.

*dent signed the cooperation agreement with the UGS "Nezavisnost" of Serbia, publicly*

*condemning Milosevic's war in Croatia and Bosnia. In January 1996, the three Croatian confederations and the largest trade union confederation of Bosnia and Herzegovina signed a joint declaration on Mostar, supporting a commitment to end the division of the city into Croat and Moslem populations.*

*I was very proud when in October 1999 the first joint conference of the leadership of the UATUC and CITUM, of Montenegro, was held in Dubrovnik. During the conference, the president of CITUM publicly apologized to the Croatian people for the war damages caused by the people and workers of Montenegro. The official apologies of the Montenegrin authorities and President Djukanovic were to follow a few months later.*

*But the region's trade unions made their most significant contribution by fighting for social issues, defending workers' rights, organising strikes, rallies, demonstrations, running collective bargaining negotiations, and securing positive changes in social legislation - which is not easy in times of war. This was the best way of contributing to a universal and lasting peace.* ●

INTERVIEW BY A.R.

## Women lead the way

**Women often play a major role in conflict resolution. A fine example is the ICFTU Central and Eastern European (CEE) Women's Network, which has pioneered cross-border relations in the region, as Jasna Petrovic explains.**

**W**omen trade unionists already established contacts during the Balkans conflict. Unionised women are very often the first to launch co-operation between different ethnicities and countries, because they have a sort of shield - their trade unions - a sort of island in a sea of madness and nationalism. It was on such foundations that the ICFTU CEE

*Women's Network was established in November 1997, a network that has regularly placed conflict prevention issues on its agenda. Today, the network brings together 32 women's groups from 22 countries/entities, representing more than 29 million working women.*

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*Firstly, it is important to explain the principles underlying our cross-border coop-*



eration efforts. Women's groups, belonging to the different trade union confederations in their respective countries, were requested to work together to launch joint campaigns and organise training, even in cases where their trade union confederations had not yet established any form of cooperation.

In May 2000, two women's groups were established in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A number of representatives from Mostar (Croatian population) and a women's delegation from Republika Srpska (Serbian population) also participated in the founding meetings. Despite the many problems encountered over the past two years, we now hold quite regular joint training sessions and seminars for the members of the SSRS Women's Group (Serbian majority), the SSSBiH Women's Section (Bosnian majority)

ty) and the Women's Group of the Trade Union Organization of the Brcko District in Neum.

#### CONFLICT PREVENTION

Furthermore, the Montenegrin women's group, "Women Today", initiated cooperation on conflict prevention with Albanian women trade unionists in June 2001, in the midst of the conflict with Albanians in the neighbouring regions of Macedonia and Kosovo. They organised a visit of delegations from the two trade union confederations, KSSH and BSPSH, (which had not cooperated very well prior to this initiative), to women trade unionists belonging to the Albanian ethnic group living in the border area of Montenegro. The Albanians received the visitors with great enthusiasm. A

return visit was organised to Skadar, in Albania, in July 2002. Similarly, Montenegrin women trade unionists played host to the delegation of Macedonian sisters in Podgorica, Montenegro, and in March 2003, they signed a cooperation agreement.

Finally, I would like to highlight the importance of the International Women's Trade Union School in Rovinj, established in 2000. Every year, it brings together some 80 women from Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Equally influential is the ICFTU CEE Network Bulletin, established in 1999, which publishes information on the cross-border cooperation activities of women and youth groups in the region. ●

A.R.

## Nepal - peaceful trade union demonstration in the midst of civil war

**The death toll has reached 7,400 in the bloody rebellion in Nepal since Maoist rebels took up arms in 1996. A ceasefire took effect in January 2003 but then, in August of this year, the rebels left the negotiating table and, since then in the last 3 months alone, the conflict has claimed 400 victims.**

Having itself lost many members in this conflict – which is essentially between the Maoists, the King and members of parliament – the NTUC (Nepal Trade Union Congress) has been calling for a peaceful solution based on democracy and dialogue. "The conflict between the rebels and the army has led to 200 deaths in our union. We support the constitutional parties and want everything to proceed on a constitutional basis. We are opposed to an absolute monarchy and are calling for the Parliament, which was dissolved in April 2002, to be restored with a multi-party government. We support negotiations with the Maoists and the holding of free elections", explains Laxman Basnet, President of the NTUC.

"Our demands are pragmatic too. We are calling, for instance, for an increase in the minimum wage that does not lead to the closure of factories. We also support free collective bargaining, based on reciprocity and not conducted at gunpoint", Mr. Basnet adds.

In September, the King decided to ban all public or private gatherings, purportedly as a response to the Maoists' failure to respect the ceasefire and to the risk that they would infiltrate demonstrations or meetings and incite



Laxman Basnet, President of the NTUC.

violence. The NTUC immediately joined the civil disobedience movement that was set up to protest against the decision.

"We demonstrated against that decision in September. But a thousand demonstrators were arrested, including several trade union leaders, and were only released six hours later. We demonstrated for an entire 10 days and there were no unpleasant incidents since we knew exactly who was demonstrating", explains Laxman Basnet. "We had asked volunteers to join the demonstration. They had to show us some identity and then joined a clearly delineated section of the demonstration. They also had to respect a precise schedule for the demonstration. As a result there was no violence". ●

A.R.

According to the latest edition of the ICFTU's Annual Survey on violations of trade union rights across the world, the Maoist guerrillas killed at least 52 trade unionists in 2002. The victims were all dragged forcibly from their workplaces, hospitals, homes or union offices, and then killed in public. The methods used by the guerrillas were extremely brutal, ranging from lynchings to beatings, mutilation, hangings and assassinations. With the disappearances, abductions, torture and illegal homicide, Amnesty International maintains that the civil war in Nepal has engendered a "catastrophic decline" in human rights in the country "attributable to both the Maoists and the government forces.

# Transport: a prime target in times of war

**T**ransport is a sector that is very sensitive to armed conflicts. Transport workers may themselves be the direct targets of terrorist attacks, as was the case on September 11. The International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) believes that the first step towards ensuring the security of the passengers and workers is a well-trained, stable workforce and adequate regulation.

Armed conflicts hold grave consequences for transport workers. They run the risk of having to enter or pass through conflict zones. During war-time, civilian aircraft, ships and their crews may be directly commandeered by military authorities or used as auxiliary services for military supply and logistics. At times of high international tension, accidental violations of air space may involve civilian aircraft being forced to land or even being shot down.

Civilian aircraft and ships are also targets of terrorist attacks and hijackings, including suicide attacks. In the September 11 attacks, aircraft with crews and passengers on board were used as weapons.

"Flags of convenience" in shipping are also used by terrorist groups to hide funds, transport equipment and people, and potentially convert their ships into weapons. For over fifty years, the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) has been campaigning for the abolition of this system, to ensure that the flags flown by the vessels are linked to the country of ownership and operation.

Some security measures have been taken to prevent such risks, but have not always benefited the workers themselves. "Employees are subjected to new security checks that, in some instances, constitute an infringement of civil liberties," explains Stuart Howard, Assistant General Secretary of the ITF.

## "TERRORIST" AND "ACTIVIST"

The so-called "Patriot Act" passed in the United States following the September 11 attacks also establishes major security checks on truck drivers transporting hazardous materials. But "there are many employers that would like to use the same measures to find proof of trade union activity" says Mr Stuart. Likewise, seafarers' unions are concerned over the ease with which a crew member who complains about working conditions



*Transport workers find themselves on the front line during mass movements of war refugees.*

(Photo: Gamma)

can be accused of threatening the order of the vessel, or even be considered a presumed terrorist.

Canadian unions have also expressed concern over the possible confusion between "terrorist" and "activist". The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) opposed Bill C-36 that gave too broad a definition of terrorism, and allowed the authorities to categorise pickets or stoppages as acts of terrorism.

The measures adopted by governments "have tended to categorise workers as a security risk rather than as the main actors contributing to security", added Mr. Stuart.

Yet transport workers would point out that a stable, well-trained and highly motivated workforce is a better security bet than a transient and unmotivated one.

Moreover, US security specialists came to the same conclusion themselves in the wake of the September 11

attacks. A US Department of Transport expert himself said that it was much harder to spot potential "risk" employees "because of the frequent turnover of drivers at some non-union trucking companies, where 100 per cent driver turnover per year is not uncommon".

It should not be forgotten that in most US airports the security tasks are subcontracted out to non-union private companies, who ignore regulations on occupational training and underpay their employees, and that some companies contract people with criminal records.

Against this background,

unions backed a proposal for the 28,000 security employees working in airports to be once again directly employed by the federal government, which is better placed to ensure respect for its own rules. The Bush administration finally chose this option.

## ECONOMIC CRISIS

Security fears have generated a catastrophic economic crisis in the airline and tourism industries.

One of the first cruise line companies to go down was *Renaissance*, which filed for bankruptcy on 25 September 2001. Based on the successful action it took following the collapse of the company *Premier*, at the end of 2000, the ITF launched an operation to rescue 1,740 *Renaissance* crew members, who consequently received compensation and were all repatriated despite rumours that the vessels would be laid up in Marseilles.

As regards civil aviation, unions support the idea that this industry plays a

strategic role in the economy and can be seen as part of a nation's infrastructure. It is not a question of privatisation versus nationalisation, as opinions on this matter vary between unions, but one of determining how to identify and satisfy the public interest. "We need to depart from the extreme laissez-faire attitude that has brought the industry to its knees," underline the same unions, which advocate "more astute, more discerning" regulations.

#### TRANSPORT OF REFUGEES

Finally, the fall out from conflict often involves the mass movement of civilian populations (war refugees) who try to reach a land of asylum by boarding aircraft, ships and any other forms of transport that enable them to leave the country.

The IFT has worked closely with the International Section of Amnesty International to campaign for the repeal of carriers' liability laws. By virtue of these laws, fines can be placed on companies that are found to have transported anyone not carrying the proper travel documents. These fines are imposed even if the company is unaware that it is transporting such a person, even if the person has a legitimate right to refugee status. As a result of such laws, companies are giving their own staff the responsibility of preventing refugees from get-

### Education for refugees

There are currently over 20 million refugees and 30 million displaced persons worldwide. According to estimates, over 60% of them, living in very precarious conditions, are children.

Education is not only a basic human right, but also an essential tool for protecting refugee children against exploitation, military enrolment, prostitution and other harmful practices, as well as helping them build their future. Whether the refugees return to their countries or settle in countries of exile, the education they receive always contributes to the economic and social development of the country in question. The global federation of education workers, Education International (EI), has been working in cooperation with the Refugee Education

Trust (RET) since it was set up by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in 2000. The mission of the trust is to raise greater awareness and provide post-primary education for refugees, given that UNICEF and the High Commission for Refugees only provide primary education in refugee camps. In recent months, EI has been providing material assistance to education centres in refugee camps in Afghanistan, Burma, Pakistan and Thailand. In September 2002, EI also took part in founding the Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), based in UNESCO's Paris headquarters. The network shares information in emergency situations, with a view to ensuring a rapid response to urgent education needs. There is indeed no shortage of willingness to act, but the lack of funding remains a major obstacle.

ting on board, asking them to confiscate passports or detain passengers. But "workers should not be forced into playing the role of auxiliary immigration police and, on many occasions, into violating international conventions

on refugees" points out Mr Stuart, who is encouraging unions to oppose companies that call on airline staff to take on these roles. ●

A.R.

## Journalists in the firing line

**Journalists are often working right on the front line and can indeed pay a high price for ensuring freedom of information in the midst of conflict.**

**Improve the security of media staff is the goal of the International News Safety Institute, recently established by the IFJ.**

**T**he Geneva Conventions provide that journalists should be treated as civilians because they have a neutral, independent observer status in wartime. Journalists surrender this protection when they become embedded with troops and are under their protection. "But we have to revisit some of these rules, because the Geneva Conventions were fashioned in an era before global media and 24-hour news programmes", explains IFJ General Secretary

Aidan White, whose priority is to ensure that the media are not targeted (\*).

#### LESSONS LEARNED IN IRAQ

Iraq is unlike any previous war. Of course, journalists have always covered wars, but in Iraq we have global media providing two clear and distinct lines of reporting—one directed at Arab audiences through the network of Arab satellite channels and the other through the prism of western media. "In the end it is the military — either through the spin-doctors at headquarters, or commanders in the field — who are manipulating the output. There is also a problem of so-called patriotic journalism, which has begun to undermine the traditional quality of some media coverage. The dismissal of Gulf War veteran Peter Arnett by the US network NBC for his frank disclosures about the conduct of the war to Iraqi Television is an example of this intolerance", says Aidan White.

**"All opinions – whether from Fox News, the BBC or Al-Jazeera – have a right to be heard. When bullets start flying, very often we see that the humanitarian values of pluralism and the rights to free expression are victims. We have to challenge this intolerance at all times".**

**(Aidan White.)**

During the conflict, the IFJ opened up a 24-hour hotline on its website providing information and help to journalists and media staff in need. In a number of serious cases, the IFJ worked with

➤ CONTINUED ON PAGE 12





*Iraq: IFJ denounces serious gaps in journalists' safety during the conflict. (Photo: Gamma)*

➔ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

unions and colleagues in Russia, the UK, Italy, Portugal, Spain and several Arab countries to assist media workers who found themselves in trouble.

With at least seven journalists killed during and after the war in Iraq, the IFJ recently published a report entitled *Justice Denied on the Road to Baghdad*, focusing on major lapses in journalists' safety during the conflict and accusing the United States of flagrant acts of irresponsibility.

Concerned about the extremely precarious working conditions of Iraqi journalists, the IFJ announced that it would be sending a solidarity mission to Iraq next January, in cooperation with the Federation of Arab Journalists (FAJ). The aim of the mission is to help establish a national structure for journalists - comprising various ethnic and cultural groups - and to help defend freedom of the press and the rights of journalists.

**'FORGOTTEN' CONFLICTS**

Unlike the enormous media attention paid to Iraq, other armed conflicts play out far from the cameras of the major international media outlets. In Chechnya, Congo and Colombia, 'shadow conflicts' all too often cast a tragic pall over the community of journalists. More than a thousand journalists have been killed over the last ten years. "But few of them are high-profile foreign correspondents according to the exotic and romantic image of journalism. More than 95% of the victims die in their own country", notes Aidan White, who says "the risks journalists face are essentially local".

This year, the IFJ - in cooperation with more than 100 media organisations, journalists' unions and other groups working for freedom of the press - created the International News Safety Institute. The Institute's goal is to promote practical international action to foster the safety and protection of journalists and media staff. Supported by

the BBC, CNN and other major press groups, the Institute will set standards for journalism safety and facilitate access by journalists from around the world to safety training, materials and assistance. ●

**N.D.**

(\*) Visit the ICFTU website at:  
<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991217401> for the full version of the interview with Aidan White

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