

Labour internationalism at a turning point

The congress held in November 2001 marked a turning point not only for Sigtur but for the international labour movement. The congress brought to the fore some underlying tensions between the unions of the so-called 'South'. It became clear in the course of the congress that the South is not a homogeneous category. This surfaced most dramatically when the Australian delegation tabled a draft resolution condemning terrorism in the US.

This resolution was tabled alongside a draft from the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and from the Central Unica dos Trabalhadores (CUT). There was much common ground between the various drafts. All participating unions unequivocally condemned the terror attacks on the US, arguing that terror can never be a weapon of change, no matter how deep the injustices. However, a deep divide arose on the issue of US foreign policy. On the surface it appeared as if all national unions, except Australia, were highly critical of US foreign policy in the South, many drawing from direct experience of overt and covert military activity and the dominance of multinational corporations (MNCs).

So while the Australians were critical of the US involvement in Afghanistan, other delegations viewed their contextualisation of the present conflict as being weak and at odds with their experience of the US in

Sakhela Buhlungu and Eddie Webster report on how the 'war against terrorism' sparked a controversial and potentially divisive debate during the sixth congress of the Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (Sigtur) held in Seoul, South Korea.

the South. During this debate undertones of racism emerged between the so-called 'white' Australian trade union movement and unions representing 13 other countries of the South such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Philippines etc.

Later in the congress, Cosatu made a critical intervention that resolved these differences. The importance of the Cosatu intervention lay not simply in the fact that it led to a joint statement on this torturous issue, but that it opened up the possibility of the Australian movement developing a deeper understanding of what is actually happening in the South. The Australian delegation became more keenly aware of the actual experience of organised labour in the South.

Redefining the South

Sigtur as a network organisation of the South, has always defined the South in political and economic terms rather than geographic, the latter making no sense in this era of globalisation. This discussion on war and peace and the global role of the US surfaced questions as to whether Australia and New Zealand are part of the South in any other than a geographical sense? This is a tantalising question and quite ironic in view of the fact that Australia was involved in initiating Sigtur in the early 1990s. Certainly both societies have witnessed the rapid erosion of the gains of social democracy over the past decade, with organised labour being the central focus of the attack. Now conditions in a large part of the Australian clothing industry are no different to those endured in the rest of the South. Much of manufacturing is moving out of Australia to other countries in the South with less developed labour conditions.

The Australian movement has a strong material interest in participating in Sigtur, given its involvement in the South (South, Southeast and East Asia). There is no question that there is a grouping of countries, largely in the southern hemisphere, who are marginalised in the global economy. Furthermore, for too long the international trade union movement has been defined in Europe and North America and often reflects the concerns, the organisational models and modes of political access of western countries. Social and economic issues specific to developing countries have frequently been ignored and marginalised.

While the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) has a presence in Asia, Africa and Latin America, it was clear from the Sigtur congress that globalisation is impacting in specific ways on certain countries. If these countries are

to develop a successful strategy to challenge their position in the new world economic order, then forums such as Sigtur are vital.

The sixth congress marked the first time in its ten years of existence that Sigtur had met in a non English-speaking country. Furthermore, for the first time the largest and most innovative labour movement in South America, (CUT) from Brazil was represented. In addition to the long-established trade unions in India (the All-Indian Trade Union Congress, AITUC and the Congress of Indian Trade Unions, CITU) and in Australia (the Australian Congress of Trade Unions, ACTU) the big three 'new' federations in the South (CUT, Cosatu and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, KCTU), were present.

Sigtur had last met in Johannesburg in October 1999, a month before the anti-globalisation protests in Seattle in November. The Seoul congress provided Sigtur with an opportunity to redefine its role in the light of the emergence of the growing anti-globalisation movement. Indeed, on the second day of the congress the delegates from the 14 countries represented in Sigtur were asked to identify whether an anti-globalisation movement existed in their country and to describe their relationship towards it. Delegates concluded that in all countries represented at the congress an anti-globalisation movement had emerged in which labour was a central actor. The significance of this growing social alliance between labour, other social movements and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) was underlined by the fact that the congress was held in a country at the centre of the contradictions generated by neoliberal globalisation.

Korea

On the one hand, Korea is very much 'connected' to the North and is part of the

new informational capitalism. They have a developed economy and are members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Korean multinationals, such as Samsung, Hyundai and Daewoo, are highly successful global players at the cutting edge of the electronics industry. The use of miniaturised consumer electronic goods such as cell phones, computers and cameras is widespread. Korean companies also dominate globally other industries such as ship building. In many ways it is the developing world's economic success story.

However, Korea is also quite 'disconnected' from the developed North. The legacy of the Cold War persists and is illustrated by the presence of 40 000 US troops. Korea remains sharply divided within itself – the capitalist South versus the communist North. It is virtually impossible for people to cross the tightly controlled demilitarised zone that divides the two.

Although there have been significant moves towards democratisation, Korea is not yet a liberal democracy. KCTU president, Dan Byung-Ho, and dozens of other union leaders are currently in jail. Civil servant workers do not have trade union rights. We attended a rally of 10 000 civil servants in Seoul who were campaigning for trade union recognition. Some public sector workers do enjoy trade union rights. Other public sector workers in essential services are allowed partial labour rights. A representative from the Public Service International spoke at the rally. He pointed out that one of the conditions for Korea's membership of the OECD was that it should abide by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) convention on freedom of association.

Disconnected

Arguably, the most striking illustration of Korea's 'disconnectedness' is that of

language and culture. Very few of the 46 million Koreans speak English – the language of globalisation. Equally importantly, very few non-Koreans speak the Korean language. Furthermore, the Korean language and alphabet are completely different from those of its larger neighbours, Japan and China. This has led Korea to be isolated from many of the global cultural currents. We were struck by the distinctiveness of the Korean culture: its ritualistic, formal, hierarchical and patriarchal form. It still tends to be group-centred and more collectivist in nature than western culture.

In part its success economically is attributable to the role the state played in fostering economic development. In fact elements of the developmental state are still present through the chaebols, multinational conglomerates owned by a small number of families which enjoy state support for export led economic development. However when the state, in the late nineties, began to withdraw support from some mismanaged chaebols, foreign investors pulled out. This precipitated large-scale restructuring, retrenchments and a phenomenal growth of contingent (casual) employment, reversing the Japanese tradition of life-long employment. We were struck, however, by the fact that virtually all the motor cars on the road are Korean and we wondered how open the Korean economy really is!

Social movement

At the centre of the challenge to this restructuring process is the Korean labour movement. The democratic labour movement in Korea dates back to 1987, a period of mass mobilisation and strikes known as the 'hot summer'. In 1995 these democratic unions formed the KCTU. From its inception the KCTU adopted a militant approach to both the state and to

employers. The driving force of this militancy is the youth, who effectively draw on traditional rituals and popular culture such as drumming, local pop music and working class songs.

There exists considerable similarity between the social movement character of the KCTU, CUT and Cosatu. All three federations have built their organisational base in the state led industries that emerged under authoritarian regimes in the sixties, seventies and eighties. Intellectuals were crucial in providing support for the development of these federations. In Korea, the Korea Labour Education Association (KLEA) was formed in 1986. It focused on providing an educational service for workers. It was transformed into the Korean Labour and Society Institute (KLSI) in May 1995, and widened its focus to include research and the analyses of policy.

These intellectuals were active in the formation of the new unions after the 1987 nation-wide strike, called in Korea the 'Great Workers Struggle of 1987'. They helped the new unions to organise, bargain and set up their administrative structures. This grouping of intellectuals was, and still is, especially important in providing educational support, including books and materials.

All three countries lack adequate social infrastructure leading these unions to articulate broader social goals and form alliances with movements struggling for democracy. Significantly in all three cases the youth were centrally involved in building this form of social movement unionism.

Unions have existed in Korea since the 1890s and were active under Japanese colonial rule. Many of these unions were committed to communism. After national liberation from Japanese colonial rule in August 1945, those Korean unions which had a socialist vision formed a national

centre with 500 000 members. But in South Korea the US-backed military government and right-wing Korean political groups, with the help of gangsters, crushed these unions and replaced them with an anti-communist trade union movement. This was the origin of present Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU).

The FKTU was tightly controlled by the state under the military dictatorship. Indeed, it could have been described as a form of state corporatism. Although the FKTU still exists and is the largest union grouping with 900 000 members and 28 industrial-level affiliates, it is increasingly being challenged by the new unions and has, in recent years, adopted relatively progressive policies.

KCTU

The KCTU has 600 000 members and 16 industrial-level affiliates. Its central role in the struggle for democracy in Korea, as well as its growing opposition to state supported restructuring, has led it to initiate its own politics. In January 2000 the KCTU participated in the formation of a working class party, the Democratic Labour Party (DLP). Although it has limited electoral support, the DLP's significance lies in the emergence of an independent working class political response to neoliberal globalisation in the South.

However, one should not exaggerate the strength of the Korean labour movement. Union density is extremely low (approximately 12%). A majority of unions remain enterprise-based and there is no centralised industry-wide bargaining. Attempts were made by the government to establish a tripartite labour council in January 1998. In February 1998 the representatives of the three parties in the council reached agreement. However, three days later at a congress of the KCTU,

a majority of the delegates rejected this agreement. But, later that year the KCTU decided to rejoin the council. Finally in 1999, the KCTU congress decided to withdraw from the council when it became clear to them that the council was a mere 'toy telephone'.

The KCTU recognises these weaknesses and is eager to learn from other labour movements. This is why they hosted the Sigtur conference. In particular, they look to Cosatu as a model of successful union organisation in the South. We were surprised to discover at the KLSI numerous copies of Cosatu's 1997 September Commission Report translated into Korean. At a KLSI seminar we participated in a session on trade union developments in Korea, South Africa and Brazil. We were questioned intensely on the different strategies adopted by labour in South Africa towards capital and the state. Many labour activists in Korea are still debating questions of reform versus revolution. Afterwards in informal discussions over dinner, the Koreans showed a detailed knowledge of labour and politics in South Africa, asking penetrating questions such as what residential areas of Johannesburg Cosatu leadership live in and what motor cars they drive!

A new form of labour internationalism

What was of interest to us was the way in which workers in the South seem to be experiencing the impact of neoliberal globalisation in similar ways. In addition to its impact on the workplace through retrenchment and casualisation, privatisation is leading to a crisis in the reproduction of labour itself. The reduction of public expenditure in areas such as health, education and social welfare, as well as the decentralisation of

financing to communities and families, is leading to widespread poverty and social exclusion.

There is an increasing use of child labour, school dropouts have increased dramatically, families have broken, and so have the numbers of suicides increased among workers and employers alike. Interestingly, delegates from the different countries reported on the rise of new social movements around such issues as rent evictions, electricity cut-offs and lack of access to public health. Discussions among delegates highlighted the fact that the labour movements in the different countries represented at the congress had raised the most significant challenge to their governments' neoliberal social and economic policies - from Brazil to Zimbabwe, Taiwan and Korea!

The 6th congress of Sigtur in Korea demonstrated the need for such a forum. What form this should take, and how it should relate to established international trade union structures, remains to be seen. What was clear to us is that globalisation has opened up opportunities for a new form of labour internationalism. This internationalism takes advantage of the network nature of globalisation, drawing on the new information technology to provide workers with instant and direct access to each other. This has the potential to complement traditional union bureaucracies, opening up the possibility of a more participatory and campaign-driven internationalism.

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