



Dialogue on
Globalization

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Report of the Journalist Seminar to the 96th annual conference of the International Labour Organization (ILO)

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YVONNE THEEMANN

Abstract: From the 11th until 14th of June 2007, nine German Journalists attended the last days of the 96th annual conference of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Geneva. This seminar taking place each year is a cooperation of the Geneva Office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the Confederation of German Trade Unions (DGB). It focused not only on the different aspects of the work of the ILO in the field on discrimination, forced labour and the promotion of “sustainable enterprises” but also addressed the cooperation between the ILO and other International Organizations as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). As a result of this year’s seminar, articles and radio spots have already been published in different German Media.

“It is not the money in which we have a comparative advantage. It only can be our ideas”, states *Friedrich Buttler* comparing the International Labour Organization (ILO) with other International Organizations. He is Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia and Assistant Director-General of the ILO.

It is not only the ILO which needs ideas to be heard. Those who are listening to Buttler at eight o’clock this morning, 12th June 2007, in room X are listening carefully. They also need ideas for their jobs, really good ones, as they are nine journalists from different German media. They have been invited by the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation (FES) and the Confederation of German Trade Unions (DGB) to come to the final conference week in Geneva to get further information on questions on labour markets, economics and trade policy. The ILO building is almost empty. Slowly but surely the 3000 delegates of the 96th annual conference of the ILO enter the building.

The Assistant Director-General of the 1919 established and oldest organization of the UN gives an overview of the general as well as current issues the ILO is dealing with, like the so called “green jobs”, “hedge funds”, “sustainable enterprises” and the closer cooperation with the European Commission and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The aim of the seminar is to give an overview of the current debate inside the ILO as well as to focus on the linkages between the ILO, the WTO and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). All three or-

ganizations play most important roles when it comes to questions of multilateral trade, development and labour.

His colleague, *Manuela Tomei*, Senior specialist on Discrimination of the ILO, straightens out the most misunderstood convention, the Convention No. 100 concerning Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Workers for Work of Equal Value later this morning. “Equal pay means work of equal value”, she says and reminds of the fact that 9 out of 10 countries around the world have ratified this convention which already entered into force in 1953. She also calls attention to a new form of discrimination which is unfortunately “not sciences fiction”: The genetic status of people. “Tests are becoming cheaper and more attractive for some interests”, Tomei warns. Furthermore, the senior specialist points out another unexpected form of discrimination. If somebody thinks of discriminated people, he or she will have in mind most probably women, disabled and old people. But who knows that smokers are victims of discrimination in an abusive and systematic way, too?

Jumping into the shuttle buses, the group of the German media is sitting at the gallery of the bright Assembly Hall at the Palais des Nations a couple of minutes later and waits. They are waiting for the speech of the German Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, *Franz Müntefering*. Some of them use the time for breathing fresh air outside the building listening to the peacocks that live in the wide garden of Geneva’s main UN building, others drink coffee and some are even already working on actual radio spots of the conference.

After almost one hour of delay, Müntefering then raises the issue of proscription of child labour and equality of women in the labour market. "We will keep this clearly in mind!" he says and calls for social rules in globalization. The German minister also stresses the need for better coordination and coherence between the ILO, WTO and the Bretton Woods Institutions, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). "If this succeeds, we can give fresh impetus to the social dimension".

Back in the ILO building, the group is having lunch with *Hans von Rohland* of the ILO Department of Communication and Public Information. Among other issues he addresses the promotion of young German professionals who are less present at the ILO as their French colleagues are. If some of the journalists and not only them had been surprised of the low visibility of ILO topics in especially German media, the small group of less than ten people in the ILO communication department might be a reason.

Some of the journalists are lost in thought; in thought of getting ideas for new stories to publish in the media. Especially the issue of the various forms of discrimination could find interest in Germany. It is just a couple of months ago, that a heated debate about the new legislation called "Antidiskriminierungsgesetz" (law against discrimination) took place.

In the coming two hours they will get even more input from a lively discussion with representatives of the Global Union Federations. *Marion Hellmann* from the Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI) evokes the "Sommermärchen" (summer fairy tale) of the 2006 Football's World Championship in Germany. As Germans are well known to be crazy about this sport, the interest for topics dealing with the round little thing on the green pitch is of high interest. Thus Hellmann presents a campaign for Decent Work in football in the lead up to 2010 World Cup in South Africa concerning the constructions of the new stadiums. "We need more attention especially from the media. The FIFA shows no interest for this at the moment!" Hellmann says.

His colleague from the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF), *Robert Steiert*, mentions that "Hochtief", an international construction services provider from Germany, "is the only enterprise in this sector which signed an agreement on labour standards worldwide". *Jürgen Buxbaum*, European Regional Secretary of the

Public Service International (PSI), focuses on the capacity of the ILO as well as the OECD on concrete conflict solution and remarks, "with the instruments they are featured with, it is just not possible". All three agree that the ILO's Core Labour Standards do not reach the quality unions would like them to achieve.

Next morning, the German group is warmly welcomed by the Worker's Group Meeting again at the Palais des Nations. There, *Ursula Engelen-Kefer*, member of the Governing Body of the ILO and vice-chairperson of the Committee on Freedom of Association describes the clearly serious matter of impunity of the murders of trade union members in Colombia. More than 2200 have been killed since 1991. She points out that "even the vice minister of Labour", *Jorge Sanchez*, "does not stop blaming trade unions". The Associated Press was told by Sanchez in May this year: Colombia's trade unions increase the numbers of murdered members "because they thrive on violence and blood".

Getting used to the screaming of the peacocks, the journalists are looking irritated by a nicker sound while sitting in Room I, back in the ILO building. Looking out of the window several horses are standing on their paddock, maybe fifty meters away. Not even thirty years ago, this part of Geneva was still covered by fields and woods. Today International Organizations, missions and institutes are sharing the place.

Michael Sommer, President of the DGB, Ernst Kreuzaler, Deput Director General of the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and Antje Gerstein from the Confederation of German Employers' Association (BDA) are discussing about the new concept of "sustainable enterprises" in their own tripartite round. At this year's session of the International Labour Conference a report titled "The promotion of sustainable enterprises" was adopted to underline the central role of the private sector for development challenges. To explain what the term sustainable enterprises actually means is difficult as no definition is given by the ILO. Gerstein puts it in her own words "the BDA assess the absence of definition as good".

Kreuzaler touches on another subject. "The ILO is afflicted with relics", a concentration in its own agenda is needed urgently, he says. During these days, the International Labour Conference will adopt its 187th convention plus the Maritim

Labour Convention and possesses almost 200 recommendations.

Sommer compliments highly the G8 ministers on their commitment to the need for social standards in the world economy. In the final document of this year's G8 meeting in Heiligendamm they agreed to "support the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Decent Work Agenda with its four pillars of equal importance (...)." They also endorse the "promotion of decent work and respect for the fundamental principles in the ILO Declaration in bilateral trade agreements and multilateral fora". Sommer concludes, "only five years ago, I could not have imagined a statement like this would be possible to resolve upon".

Heiner Flassbeck doesn't take his enthusiastic view. "As long as the commodity prizes are at such a low level, nothing will help the developing countries", states the Director of the Division on Globalization Development Strategies of the UNCTAD where the group is guest afterwards.

That the G8 summit can only be one little step to ameliorate our world, demonstrates the following: approximately 12.3 million people are victims of forced labour worldwide, but the real numbers might be even higher. *Beate Andres* from the ILO's Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour explains the difficulties the ILO is faced with to combat the new forms of slavery as no country admits to allow forced labour in its own country. Thus data is almost not available. But at least there is increasing cooperation between the different International Organizations to combat forced labour. "Since 2006, the Core Labour Standards are part of the World Bank's tendering procedures", *Andres* emphasizes.

Bearing in mind that even the points of view at the ILO and the UNCTAD do not always correspond and that sometimes the staff likes to criticize each other, the group of German journalists is on the way to their final meeting of this year's FES/DGB ILO seminar. Just a couple of meters away from Lake Geneva they are entering the Centre William Rappard, testimony to over seventy years of international cooperation as it is said on the website of the WTO. Since 1995 it is the headquarters of the World Trade Organization and before it had been the residence of different international organization, also of ILO. *Keith Rockwell*, Director of the WTO's Information and Media Relations Division, gives a hearty welcome to the group and describes the set of rules of the WTO, a member driven organization. The secretariat can not decide on anything, there are only the member states that make the decisions. "But nothing is agreed till everything is agreed", *Rockwell* underlines. As the WTO is often criticized concerning the influence of world trade on developing countries, he mentions that "the developing countries feel having more power in the WTO as in the UN institutions. Here they formed their own groups".

Leaving the WTO building behind them, the nine journalists take their package and say almost "à la prochaine" to this small but international town of Geneva. Before they will jump into their planes, they are having lunch with WTO-ambassadors from Benin, Mexico, Chile and Germany. Just a couple of days before the G4 meeting in Potsdam, the discussion is quite interesting, as one can imagine....

With the ideas they got during the last days, the journalists won't get rich. But with these ideas they will enrich the German debate of Labour Standards definitely.

On the author: Yvonne Theemann holds a master's degree in political science from the University of Potsdam / Germany and works as an intern for the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, Geneva Office. • June 2007
info@fes.geneva.org, www.fes-globalization.org

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Hiroshimastrasse 17
10785 Berlin
Germany
Tel.: +49 30 26 935 914
Fax: +49 30 26 935 959
Roswitha.Kiewitt@fes.de
www.fes.de/globalization

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Genf
6 bis, Chemin du Point-du-Jour
1202 Geneva
Switzerland
Tel. +41 22 733 3450
Fax: +41 22 733 3545
info@fes-geneva.org
www.fes-geneva.org