

Philip Bowyer's speech at the UNI Communicators' Forum

Philip Bowyer, Deputy General Secretary of UNI Global Union
Cape Town, South Africa, 11th April 2008

For the last two days you have been discussing all the different ways in which you communicate. How you get the stories, information and messages across to members and the wider public.

In the next fifteen minutes I want to talk about what the message is. What are the issues which are important to UNI that we need to communicate to our members.

last year those who were in Singapore will remember that I spoke at length on Private Equity and the ways in which this new form of capitalism was sweeping the globe, threatening workers interests and the unions that represent them. It was definitely flavour of the month in 2007.

Today with the financial crisis growing out of the sub prime mortgage scandals there are people questioning whether the great days of private equity have come to an end. The strategies of private equity depend to a great extent on the massive amount of cash wallowing around the international financial systems and the availability of loans at very low interest rates. It is true that the crisis is putting a squeeze on cash available and on interest rates in many countries.

But the private equity groups that we talk to still insist that they have a lot of cash. There still lotsa money and lotsa deals to be done. Perhaps they will not be the deals going up into the stratosphere of 30, 40 or more billions of dollars but still there will be plenty of smaller deals to be done.

And the interesting twist in the tale in the past year has been the changing attitude of private equity groups to trade unions and to society in general. In many countries the blaze of publicity, the parliamentary enquiries and the continuing scandals of massive fees and plain straightforward greed have convinced many in PE that they have to tidy up their act and make friends

UNI has continued many activities around the subject but perhaps most interesting have been our discussions with private equity groups in the UK, France and the USA. Largely in response to our activities the major players in the USA came together to form a common group the Private Equity Council of the USA. They have been preparing guidelines or principles which they want to discuss with the international unions, GUFs in the coming weeks. So all of you communicators watch this space. There could be important news of the first agreement between unions and private equity in the coming weeks or months.

Just as we want to do a deal with PE, to come to global agreements with them about how they will respect workers rights in the companies they buy so we continue our work to conclude agreements with the major multinational companies coming within our areas of interest. At our Chicago Congress we set ourselves the target of getting 50 agreements by the time we meet in Nagasaki in 2010. Today we are approaching 20 such agreements and we have set ourselves the aim of getting another 15 by the end of the year.

So look out in the coming weeks for new agreements. Some of them will be with very famous names such as in the finance sector with Barclays. We want to get an agreement with Shoprite, the biggest supermarket chain here in south Africa which is spreading its activities throughout southern Africa and even to India. We want an agreement with Group 4. I was surprised walking through the shopping centre to see guards on horseback. I expected them to be the local police but as they passed I realised the motif on their back was that of Group 4.

Our property services sector has led an intense campaign worldwide to get Group 4 to the negotiating table. We have helped organising programmes here in South Africa, in Malawi. We have a huge organising programme in India. The company has consistently refused to recognise our union in the USA. It goes to extraordinary lengths there to avoid the union. But we are convinced the campaign is paying off. Group 4 have agreed to mediation under the OECD procedures for dealing with complaints against multinational companies. The first time in our history a company has done that.

So we are confident that with continuing effort we are going to get an agreement with Group 4.

It is a good example of how we combine the fight for the global agreement with organising. And we are following the same tactic with DHL, the giant logistics company. We have big organising projects going in the USA, in Hong Kong and in Latin America and we will get an agreement with DHL.

And organising is the key to the future for UNI. So even where there may be no immediate prospect of a global agreement organising is at the front of our activities. We are organising IT, telephone and commerce workers in India. Besides DHL, in Hong Kong we are organising in Disney. This could be a great breakthrough. Disney has 500 people working on one park in Hong Kong. It is the only Disney park not organised. When we win there it will be an example for all other unions in Hong Kong.

And finally we have been amazed by the spread of contract work, agency labour or whatever it is called in different countries. In India a company like Vodafone does not employ many workers and those who are there are more than likely to be agency workers. And the practise is widespread across all our sectors, just this morning we visited the Chemical workers union here in Cape Town. And when we asked what was their biggest problem they started to explain how agency workers are taking the place of regular workers in all the industries they organise. From the chemical workers to the paper and print workers. We were told how in one factory a thousand workers were dismissed and taken on the next day as agency workers doing exactly the same jobs but of course without the protection of a union because they no longer worked for the factory but for an agency.

So watch this space. UNI is in discussions with the biggest temporary work agencies like Manpower and Adecco and we fully expect to sign global agreements with the biggest five before the end of the year. This could be the biggest story of the year. Between them these companies employ millions of workers world wide.

And finally as I come to the end of my contribution this morning let me draw your attention to a major task of UNI. It is what I call our function of shining light on the darkness. You know there are countries and situations that people just don't want to talk about or want to forget about. Right here on the doorstep of South Africa we see Zimbabwe. Its ten days since the elections there. The Mugabe dictatorship refuses to declare the results and is terrorising the population of Zimbabwe. But already the story is dropping from the headlines. We cannot let it be forgotten. Whatever the politics of Zimbabwe do not forget the leader of the opposition comes from the trade union movement. He led the trade union movement and the trade union movement remains the main organised opposition leading the fight for democracy. And do not forget the current President of the trade union movement in Zimbabwe is one of ours. He is a postal worker affiliated to UNI. He has been sacked from his job as a postal worker because he dares to stand up for workers and to oppose the government which has ruined Zimbabwe.

We cannot allow the world to forget.

Look at the Philippines. You will not find much about it in the press or on the TV. It's a big country. It has a population of more than 85 million. It has a government mired in allegations

of corruption and scandal. And it is sliding into a murderous lawlessness which gets politely called 'extra judicial killings.'

Estimates vary but in the last five years at least 300 people have disappeared or been executed. And other estimates put the figure as high as 1,500.

And nobody but nobody is ever brought to justice.

In March UNI sent a fact finding mission there. They concluded 'a dirty war is being conducted in this country'. 'Trade unionists are being labelled as terrorists when in fact they are the victims of terrorism'.

The mission collected the stories of some 87 trade union activists who have been killed. The latest one was murdered just one week before the mission arrived in March, in traffic in broad daylight.

In 2007 alone 33 trade union activists were killed. They don't kill leaders. The big Presidents. They kill the local leaders as if to discourage all the other trade union members. Nobody knows if it is the government behind these killings. But as they occur the government is pursuing an anti union policy increasing contract labour, creating union free workplaces, police and goons intimidate anyone who dares go on strike.

And the one clear message from the relatives and friends of those assassinated was always the same. We feel so alone. NGOs come and go. The trade unions in the Philippines offer not support. We are so alone.

And if the Philippines or Zimbabwe are not bad enough remember Colombia. In the last 20 years some 3,000 trade union leaders have been killed. Who knows who has done these killings? It is a country where there are several guerrilla armies as well as the government forces carrying out all the dirty tricks you can find in any war.

But one thing is certain. Whoever committed the crimes no government has ever investigated properly and no-one is ever brought to justice.

The government does nothing. The President of the country claimed the stories were exaggerated and that only 25 trade unionists were murdered in 2007. We have reports of 72 being killed. But whichever figure is right you imagine if in your country last year or this year 25 trade union activists were murdered. People murdered because they take part in collective bargaining, because they dare to go on strike.

One of the latest murders was of the leader of a UNI union, Leonidas Gomez Roza. He was employed by Citybank. He was one of the founders of the Citybank union. He held positions in the national centre, the CUT. And around March 8th he was found murdered.

A UNI delegation to Colombia was told by the authorities that it was a crime of passion. Whatever they promise we know there will be no real investigation unless we keep insisting. So go to our website if you have not already done so. There you will find a click and go solidarity message. Please sign it. Give publicity to it when you get home. Get your friends and union members to sign it.

We must do whatever we can do. In countries like Zimbabwe, Philippines and Colombia there are brave courageous trade unionists will to put their jobs on the line, willing to put their lives on the line. Whatever else we do we have a duty to support them. We must not let the world forget about them.

We shine the light on the darkness.

Thank you
Gomez

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