



Dear colleagues,
Dear friends,

Please allow me the opportunity to thank you for the invitation to attend the 15th Ordinary Congress of the German Christian Trade Union Confederation (15. Ordentlichen Bundeskongress der Christlicher Gewerkschaftsbund Deutschlands – CGB. I feel honoured to again stand here in front of you after also doing so during the congress of 2008. This first of all means that the relationship between the CGB and the WOW are good and strong, but it also means that the World Organization of Workers – WOW is still there. I will come back to this soon.

The title chosen for your congress really appeals to me. Trade Union Right is Human Right – CGB! (Gewerkschaftsrecht ist Menschenrecht – CGB!) expresses what I too feel. Throughout the world people are too often left outside of the process of decision-making and though we have organized things quite well in countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark etc. we merely have to travel to the Eastern European countries to experience the vast differences.

But even in our countries trade unions are under pressure. Declining membership and support leave the unions confused and in doubt. What measures should be taken to counter these developments? Will there be place for us in future-society? And what will happen with the people, the workers, who are part of a Collective Labour Agreement (CLA) negotiated by the trade unions?

Being part of a CLA is in my opinion a right. It provides a form of protection and support which is very important in the relationship between employer and employee. It formalizes standards to prevent employers to act at will. In the Netherlands we see that those who are not a part of a CLA often are less well off in case of redundancy and conflicts. Of course there is the law, but this does not always answer all questions.

And this brings me to Trade Union Pluralism. At the end of September of this year we organized a seminar in Berlin, Germany titled: Trade Union Pluralism: Dream of Reality? The WOW is a strong believer and supporter of pluralism. Pluralism gives ground for open dialogue and results in democratic decisions. These decisions are not necessarily represent one's personal opinion. They are always a compromise between the different existing ideas. This means that everyone involved in this process of decision-making has to give in a little. Sometimes you win and sometimes you lose. But the prevailing thought behind this process is that it is done in a democratic way. This gives a basis for understanding and accepting certain outcomes.

In the Netherlands collective labour agreements are the responsibility of the social partners. These are the employers' organizations and employees' organizations (trade unions). They together negotiate about new CLA's. Within a company there may be members of different unions. The consequence of this is that the organizations, i.e. trade unions, represent their own members. Meaning that all representative unions in a company may be part of the negotiations. And though the routes to a final decision may differ, we believe that this is a good thing. It proves that there is a basis for a certain agreement which is supported by the majority of workers.

To become a member of a union is one's personal choice. And so is the choice for a particular union. Of course we would like to have more members, but if they are not a member of our union we still believe in the support for the them. In relation to that we believe that the right to join a union of your liking is a personal right and thus a human right. It is a human right too because of the freedom of choice which lies at the basis of it.

To come back to the strength of the WOW. The year 2008 marked the beginning of the current WOW. Though we were founded in 1921 in Luxemburg and carried the name WFCW for a very long time, the developments on international level (merger ICFTU – WCL into one organization – ITUC) left us without umbrella-organization in 2006. We wanted to continue since we strongly believed (and still believe) in our Social-Christian principles. It meant we had to find new ways to organize this. A new name was pivotal, statutes had to be adapted, an office to be found etc. With a lot of efforts by many we managed to succeed in this. We created our new structure building further on the fundamentals laid in the ninety years before.



Our congress in 2008 in Malta was the formalization of all the work done. A very important decision was that the new name was accepted, giving us a new fresh start. We denounced the merger for a number of reasons. The most important being the fear of our Social-Christian principles being whipped out by other principles which were not our own. Another reason was our believe that a bigger organization is not necessarily a better organization. And the support for our believe comes to the surface from time to time. In our opinion it is all about principles and personal contacts. There has to be a basis for cooperation. In our case this is our Social-Christian background. It is important not to lose or forget about these principles. It is what we are all made off and came from. And there has to be a place for this. Just like one can support a political party which they feel a connection with and whom they trust.

As you may understand from what has been said before I strongly focus on pluralism and freedom of choice. For me trade union pluralism, trade union right and freedom of choice are closely connected. One supports a union when there is understanding that one feels heard and respected. Unions will have to work hard to gain this support, meaning that they will have to try their best to be better than the other. But also that they are accessible to all.

When I hear that employers in Europe do not allow their employees to be a member of a union, I feel that there is still a lot of work to be done. In that case the right to be a member of union is there only on paper. Being a member of a union does not have to obstruct the particular company. Actually, it is very often the other way around. Employees feel more connected to a company and they show this through their trade union membership. A satisfied employee is far better off than one who is not.

These practices still occur in Eastern Europe. These former communist countries did have unions. These were state-regulated however. Being a member was not a right and not something one did out of principles. It was a duty. Demanded from the top. This mindset has not changed a lot. Not in the minds of the employers, but also not in the minds of the employees. This is a slow process. Becoming a member is therefore not considered obvious. Taken into account history this is more than understandable. Many people will still have to see membership of a trade union as something positive and as a right.

Let us work on this change of perception together. I believe that is the only way. I wish you a good Congress.

World Organization of Workers – WOW

Roel Rotshuizen
President