

SIGTUR – A MOVEMENT OF DEMOCRATIC UNIONS OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH

1. WHAT IS SIGTUR?

SIGTUR, the *Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights*, is an alliance and a movement of democratic unions in the Global South (Latin America, Africa, Asia and Australia).

(P)SIGTUR is a ***space of open debate*** through its regular Congresses and leaders' meetings in order to formulate and present a united voice of the working class in the Global South.

Such a voice is shaped by the historical experience of workers in the Global South. This is an experience of plunder and exploitation through trade in resources and persons (the slave trade and indentured labour systems). In this we witness how capital came into being, 'dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt'.

This was the experience of the colonial period, which many activists know only too well through their families stories over generations.

(P)As Malaysian trade union leader Arokia Dass stated,

I am a product of the indentured labor system. My father was forcibly transported from India to Malaysia. I grew up in semi-slave conditions. I experienced inner feelings of racial inferiority my whole life.

This past has shaped the present as new forms of imperialism reflected in the strategies of global corporations continue the pillage of the Global South, promoting and reinforcing slave like, cheap labour conditions across all continents.

SIGTUR as a space to share our experiences creates ***a new identity*** unique to the Global South, which is a potential source of power and commitment.

(P)Past and present repression against unions (see how Korean union leaders are constantly being thrown into jail by their 'democratic' government) has formed a particular ***culture of struggle*** in the Global South.

The space SIGTUR creates also enables a sharing of ***organisational experience***, so the stronger more well established federations can share their methods of organising and struggle with the newer unions.

SIGTUR is not just a space to share a common southern experience, even though this emerging wider social consciousness is vital to drive the struggle. SIGTUR is a space to develop an ***alternative vision*** to that of neo-liberal globalisation.

It is a space to forge, over time, a new, anti-free market politics. This has grown out of the mass protests across the south over the past two decades.

It is a space to challenge global corporations, the banking system and the elites who profit from their exploitation.

Finally, it is a space to find new sources of power and new strategies and to **organise action**, linking the local to the global to mobilise against these forces. (See section below).

2. HOW DID SIGTUR COME INTO BEING?

SIGTUR is the realisation of a dream, a vision, which COSATU leaders had in the late 1980s, when they sensed the advent of the free market ideology spelt disaster for working people across the globe and in the Global South in particular.

The then General Secretary of COSATU, Jay Naidoo, asserted that **a south/south internationalism** needed to be constructed. Zwelinzima Vavi participated in the early meetings where the structure of SIGTUR was formulated.

COSATU found a willing ally in the Australian trade union movement (the ACTU: *Australian Council of Trade Unions*) who were themselves concerned about the 'race to the bottom' that neo-liberal globalisation represented.

The Australian unions had a strong historical tradition of an **activist labor internationalism**.

After the Second World War they blocked Dutch ships carrying troops to retake 'their colony' Indonesia.

During the Apartheid era, they placed bans on South African shipping.

And so SIGTUR was born out of a creative, proactive response to the radical market ideology of neo-liberalism, which has created such destruction across the globe.

(P)SIGTUR was launched at a meeting of democratic unions from the Global South in May 1991 in Western Australia. This meeting comprised representatives of the *Congress of South African Trade Unions* (COSATU); the *Australian Council of Trade Unions* (ACTU); the newly formed trade union federation *Solidarity* in Indonesia; the *Kilusang Mayo Uno* (May the First Movement) in the Philippines and a representative from the Malaysian trade unions.

From this small beginning of two labor movements coming together to create something new, the initiative has grown over the past twenty years and now embraces movements in 35 countries and four continents.

3. WHAT KIND OF LABOR INTERNATIONALISM ?

COSATU leaders had a simple proposition: if **a new style of democratic unionism** at a national level in South Africa empowered workers in the bitter struggle against racial capitalism in South Africa, could this model not be applied to organising at an international level.

A new style of democratic unionism evolved in South Africa during the 1970s, one that created space for workers to participate actively. It gave them a voice for it was based on the principle of worker control. It reclaimed their humanity, their dignity. ***This is the style applied to this southern initiative.***

4. WHAT HAS BEEN DONE SO FAR?

Free market (neo-liberal) globalisation has been socially destructive on a massive scale, right the way across the globe and in the Global South in particular, intensifying the plunder of resource rich continents such as Africa, creating deep insecurity and massive injustice as it concentrates unbelievable personal wealth in the top one percent of society and extreme poverty and dispossession for the majority.

United Nations report

Today the net worth of the 358 richest people in the world, the \$ Billionaires, is equal to the combined income of the poorest 45% of the world's population, 2.3 billion people

The free market system on a global scale leads to a massive concentration of corporate power. In all sectors, just ten global corporations control 70 per cent of the market. This gives them power greater than most nation states.

They are able to bend governments to their will: undermining laws everywhere, which defend nature and society.

These corporations are themselves driven by the dominance of finance capital. Investment banks, private equity and hedge funds have turned stock markets into casinos, speculating and destabilizing societies across the globe.

The ongoing global financial crisis is wreaking havoc across the Global South and in the north, yet no persons or banks have been held to account for the massive losses.

Without doubt, it is hard not to be pessimistic in the face of this combined and coordinated power of capital.

However, there is another side to this phenomenal concentration of power.

Neoliberalism has led to a very tight integration of the global economy.

Just in time production systems means that companies keep no stock. They are highly dependent on smooth running transport and communications systems.

Through systems of outsourcing, global production networks have been created. These systems are highly integrated. Companies are utterly dependent on the smooth flow of commodities through these systems.

In short, the neo-liberal freedoms of trade, investment and finance, will become the gravediggers of the system, ***if the working class becomes globally coordinated and if unions imagine and organise new forms of power to massively disrupt these systems until capital and its political allies come to the bargaining table.***

The democratic union movement in the Global South has the capacity to imagine, plan and organise new forms of resistance to defend society and nature because they have been down that road at a national level as they engaged in national liberation struggles.

So what has SIGTUR done?

Shipping Boycotts

In its relatively short history, SIGTUR was the *first union body in the world to experiment with disrupting the tight integration of the global economy* that neo-liberalism had created when it successfully organised three shipping boycotts to defeat the neo-liberal agenda in Australia.

(P)The first shipping boycott was planned as a global strategy in 1995, when the Western Australian state government prepared new anti-union labor laws, based on a system of individual contracts. SIGTUR communicated the predicament of Australian workers and boycott plans were developed. The COSATU NEC stated that they could not stand idly by while Australian workers were being attacked. The solidarity actions of Australian workers (shipping bans) were still fresh in the memory of the NEC members.

As a prelude to action, the then International Secretary of COSATU, Sticks, organised a high level delegation which met the Australian Ambassador to Australia. The Ambassador was warned that shipping boycotts would be applied if the anti-union laws were not withdrawn.

Unions across Asia organised protests at Australian Embassies to reinforce COSATU's action.

The message was conveyed back to Australia. The then Premier of Western Australia organised secret meeting with Tony Cooke, then state secretary of the ACTU, at six am in an inner city car park. The Premier stated, I will withdraw the legislation, even though it will mean opposition from within my Cabinet, if you organise the withdrawal of the boycott'.

The laws were withdrawn. However, two years later, in 1997, the laws were reintroduced, leading to a reactivation of the boycott and further protest action across Asia. This, together with intense local protests, led to the laws never being applied.

The same tactic was utilised in April 1998, when the Conservative government in Australia developed an illegal scheme to de-unionise the Australian docks. COSATU in league with the *International Transport Federation* (ITF) again triggered a shipping boycott.

Global Campaigning

(p)When the Australian Construction and Mining union (CFMEU) organized a global campaign against the UK headquartered Rio Tinto mining corporation SIGTUR played a key role in the Global South, organizing street protests across a wide range of countries. SIGTUR also participated in share-holder meeting interventions.

SIGTUR also organised various global protest actions at Embassies with regard to imprisonments in Korea, the Philippines and Thailand.

Global Responses to National Level Collective Bargaining

(P)When an Australian construction company, Boral Australia, refused to bargain with the democratic union in the Indonesian branch of the company, P T Jaya Ready Mix, SIGTUR organised a global campaign of support in which the *Australian Manufacturing*

Workers Union (AMWU), played a key role. The company caved in and Boral ordered its Indonesian branch to recognize the union. Indonesian activists commented,

‘We understand that all victories seem small victories, however the victories evoke a spirit of resistance where workers unite and fight for all.’

A second illustration of this mode of action that SIGTUR has promoted and developed is the Hyundai struggle in Chennai India. CITU, the leading Indian federation, led a campaign for union rights in the Hyundai plant. These rights were refused. Management had a shocking attitude to Hindu culture, smashing icons at work stations. There were strikes and Gandhi styled passive resistance in the community. The KCTU from Korea participated in these protests as a mark of solidarity with the Indian workforce. They joined a human chain around the factory.

In turn, Indian workers visited Seoul to express their solidarity with the struggles of workers against casualisation in Korea. Both workforces have attempted to synchronise their collective bargaining strategies and the *Maritime Union of Australia* has joined these struggles.

Companies try to set one workforce against another within the same corporation. SIGTUR is in solidarity with these local struggles stimulating these global responses.

5. Challenges & the Future of SIGTUR

SIGTUR has continued to expand across the Global South and it has continued to be alert to the opportunities to link and promote struggles in the Global South.

To advance the struggle in the south, we have to further build the capacity of SIGTUR, beyond a reliance on busy International Secretaries of National Federations. In particular, SIGTUR recognises communication power and is determined to create an effective system utilising the new technologies in an organisationally grounded manner.

Global communication is not an end, but a means to creating close working relationships in each major sector. Knowledge is consciousness raising, a building of a new southern consciousness as the basis for developing an effective resistance to neo-liberal restructuring.

(P)SIGTUR set the following long term goals at its 9th Congress in Sao Paulo:

Strategic Trade Union Platform for a New World Economic Order

We come out of this gathering united behind a global economic justice program which is the mainstay of our campaigns, networking and co-operation as workers and activists from the South.

The key pillars of our program are:

- Just and fair trade for industrialisation and development in the Global South.
- The end of financial speculation and the subordination of financial markets to the needs of development and social equity.

- Building working class solidarity to confront the power of multinational corporations and defend workers from exploitation and the abuse of their rights and to advance decent work for all.
- Building popular consciousness about the ecological crisis and the devastating effects of climate change on workers and the future of our planet in general.
- Fighting for gender equality, health and safety and actively campaign against the scourge of HIV and AIDS in most of our countries.
- Fighting for the effective transformation of global governance and democratising global power relations.
- Intensifying the advancement and defence of trade union rights in all countries.
- Creation of a world free from imperialist aggression, nuclear weapons, occupational and economic blockades and unjust sanctions.

6. SIGTUR & AFRICA

Africa is central to this struggle for global economic justice. This is a mineral and agriculturally rich continent, with a diversity of cultures and languages grounded in a sense of the people, a sense of the social and a sense of community, which has been distorted by colonial histories.

ITUC Africa is at the centre of the renewal and revitalisation of the trade union movement in Africa, building unions committed to the activation of civil society.

Whilst corporations and their interests see the continent as a place to plunder, the democratic unions view ITUC Africa from the perspective of solidarity arising out of a common vision.

The whole globe is being shaped in negative ways by free market global capitalism.

Across the globe, the ratio of income between CEOs and the average worker's wage was 30:1 in 1970. It is now 350:1. Wherever neo-liberalisation has been rampant, billionaires have suddenly emerged on the *Forbes* list of wealthiest people in the world. For example, Carlos Slim of Mexico is now ranked as one of the wealthiest people in the world, and he rose to that position on the back of a wave of neoliberalisation that occurred in Mexico in the early 1990s. Meanwhile, the working population of Mexico is falling deeper and deeper into abject poverty.

ITUC Africa has chosen a different model, a model based on global economic justice, based on participation of all citizens in economic, social and political processes.

This is the agenda of the entire Global South. ITUC Africa in building the new Africa, is, at the same time, reshaping the Global South. Workers from all parts of the vast continents of Asia and Latin America, are united in the struggle to liberate Africa, as they fight for the same transformation in their countries, also characterised by an obscene gap between the rich elites and the working poor.

This is the new liberation struggle, one we are determined to win.

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November 2011