

**Intervention by:**

**Guy Ryder**

**General Secretary**

**of the**

**International Trade Union Confederation**

**at the**

**24th Session of the Governing Council/Global Ministerial**

**Environment Forum**

**Kenya**

**Nairobi, 6 February 2007**

Chair, Executive Director, Ministers, Delegates, Observers,

I much appreciate this opportunity to respond to the most important debates of the last two days.

I do so on behalf of the International Trade Union Confederation and in its name want to thank UNEP for the cooperation already extended to the international labour movement in developing and increasing activities on environmental and sustainable development issues. Just over one year ago the UNEP hosted the Trade Union Assembly on Labour and the Environment, which marked an important landmark in our work in the field. We are investing efforts and resources in taking it forward further still.

As a first time visitor to this forum it is perhaps not appropriate for me to comment on UNEP processes, but it is nevertheless difficult to avoid the conclusion that UNEP – all of you – find yourselves at a moment of crucial importance in the development of your organisation and of the issues you deal with.

Recently published evidence and the wide public reaction it has provoked has it seems suddenly thrust UNEP centre stage in the international policy debate. You are expected to respond to one of, perhaps the most pressing global policy issue of the day. Perhaps you are asking yourselves if you actually have the star quality to pull off this role, and the right script, or even a big enough theatre.

I have found much in the debates of the last two days which encourages me to believe that you are indeed going to step up to the task. Indeed you must do. But let me, from a labour perspective say what I believe are some of the major challenges ahead.

Firstly – perhaps most fundamentally - you are called upon to address issues which can only be addressed globally, which can only be addressed at significant cost (in the short term at least) and where costs will only grow quickly the longer action is delayed; which can only be addressed by impacting on strongly entrenched vested interests and habits; and which can only be addressed by breaking radically from past practice and orthodoxies.

The fact of the matter is that consistently and uniformly the international system has underperformed, sometimes very badly – in its task of exercising governance of globalisation. Those failures extend well beyond the environmental field and I won't enlarge on them.

But I believe they reflect an underlying constraint. It is that individually and collectively Governments have rather fallen under the spell of the prevailing belief that the best thing they can do is to make themselves small – to unleash the forces of the market, and then get out of the way.

This is the era of small Governments and free market economics. And yet today we are faced with a critical situation which (according to a better authority than I) constitutes the biggest market failure in history, and which, self-evidently, requires assertive state and inter-state action which must include new and

considerable international regulation and constraints on the way markets work and on those who act in them.

This is not a technical question but a political one, and in the absence of a significantly bold response to it, all subsequent issues could fall by default – to the disadvantage of us all.

And in the real world of politics there are two further complicating factors.

1/ Our leaders have to bear the costs of action now – knowing that the pay-offs (considerable as they will be, much greater than the initial) will only accrue well after their likely period of office is over. There is the dilemma of the European leader who said “we all know what we must do – but none of us know how to get elected again after we have done it!” They are going to have to convince public opinion and win public support – and this will only be possible if the international community provides the clear evidence that this is part of world wide action – with costs shared and pay offs for all.

2/ Costs and benefits are and will be unevenly distributed. And so considerations of equity, and, in our trade union vocabulary of solidarity are going to have to be factored into the equation. This is not just as a matter of ethics (although some would consider that sufficient justification) but because it is difficult to imagine a critical mass of international consensus on action being brought about without it.

Chair,

A number of the rapporteurs this afternoon referred to the over-arching concept of sustainable development and its three component parts (environmental, social and economic) and we believe this to be vitally important, precisely because it does remind us of the need for coherence in international policy making. We need two dimensions of such coherence between environmental issues and between them and the other dimensions. I agree with much of what has been said on this, and would only add that the search for such coherence necessarily implies strengthening of inter-institutional cooperation - between UNEP and WTO yes – but with others too.

It is striking I think that so little has been said here about the social dimension of sustainable development. If the different scenarios now circulating are accepted - and they have not been contested here - we are faced with the task of designing and implementing the most fundamental transformation of production and consumption processes in modern history. And uniquely this transformation will require renunciation of existing technologies and habits even when they continue to offer significant short term advantages, to some at least. This is something quite without precedent.

Many have said that environmental protection does not mean giving up on growth, development and better living standards – that these objectives go together.

This, of course, makes us all feel better. But it should not send us to sleep.

It is wrong to suppose that this is inevitable. It is not a given, not a happy coincidence, nor “a convenient truth” that will inevitably apply and which can dispense us from the difficult tasks ahead.

Rather these are tough choices ahead and different options from which we must select those that are best at reconciling these objectives and winning support for them.

What I can say is that trade unionists are firmly committed to sustainable development goals, in full knowledge that securing them will require very considerable churning of employment and disruption of labour markets; the disappearance of large numbers of jobs, which will need to be replaced by the creation of others. Trade unions are pointing to the need for “just transition” from current production and employment patterns to those we need – processes which will engage working people and their trade unions – make demands of them yes, but recognise too that decent work opportunities for all are also critical to sustainability.

The new regulatory environment that is required to bring about sustainable production behaviour – and it is going to have to be global in scope - will need to leave space for, rest upon, and promote interaction between business and trade unions who have accumulated a wealth of expertise and know how, and have a responsibility for and an interest in negotiating restructuring of enterprises and sectors, to preserve both jobs and the environment.

At this stage a lot remains to be done; we are just beginning. But it is not too early to start working on defining the contours of the green economy and how we get there. Where are the green jobs coming from? Who will be the green workforce? What will they do?

I hope that these can become issues for UNEP and trade unions to explore together as we deepen our partnership. The ITUC is a newly born organisation and I see a happy circumstance that it came to life just at the moment when environmental issues are coming to the top of the agenda. We are committed to act with UNEP and with whatever organisation it may metamorphose into the future. In any case we hope that that will be here in Nairobi.

Guy Ryder  
General Secretary  
ITUC