

**Speech by Guy Ryder
ITUC General Secretary
1st ITUC World Women's Conference
Brussels, 20 October 2009**

President, Delegates, Guests,

Let me echo on behalf of the ITUC, the words of welcome which have already been addressed to you by the host organisations of this Conference. In turn let me thank also our three Belgian affiliates for receiving us here.

Some 465 representatives from over 100 countries have come to Brussels for this 1st ITUC World Women's Conference. Your presence here in such numbers is graphic evidence that decent work for women is a priority for ITUC affiliates around the world, that trade unions recognize that they are critical agents of equality at work and in society and that they stand ready to assume their responsibilities in that regard.

The documents provided for this Conference provided equally graphic evidence of a reality that all of you know – that the decent work deficit for women is more profound than it is for men, and that the phenomenon of gender inequality is universal, complex in its multiple dimensions, and also that it has proven remarkably resistant to the action so far taken to eradicate it. We have before us then a rather clear definition of the problem we must address. The challenge before all of you, before this Conference, is to define with the same clarity what the ITUC and its Global Unions partners need to do to drive the decent work for women agenda forward in ways which do, finally, bring down the edifice of inequality.

I don't underestimate the size of that challenge. Of course we are not starting from zero and each of you brings a wealth of national knowledge and experience to the job. Yet shaping all of that into practical global strategies is no small task. Fortunately there is a lot working in our favour too.

In the first place, the work of this Conference has been organised to make it participating, practical, problem solving. We hope it will help you produce results.

Secondly, the timing of the Conference could not be better so far as the ITUC's own calendar is concerned. Because it meets some months before the 2nd ITUC World Congress in Vancouver. That means that what you have to say here can and will be fed into our Congress preparations and that you have here real opportunity to determine the direction your International takes in the next four years.

Which leads me to the third point, which is that promoting decent work and decent life for women is not one more task for the ITUC alongside all of the others – it is rather an essential component of every one of our priorities. The theme of the Vancouver Congress is "Now the People – From the Crisis to Global Justice" and whichever way you look at it, the gender dimension is very much present. Beating the global crisis; Fundamental Rights at Work; Jobs; Organising; Social Protection; Social Dialogue; Migration; Climate Change; Informal Economy. In every case, it is there. We must recognize it and act on it.

As I have said the documents before you highlight just what this means for the lives of working women. While official Government statistics put the global gender pay gap around 16.5%, survey work undertaken for the ITUC this year shows it to be much higher – at 23% or still higher, for full-timers. And despite

the legislation in place in most countries and other measures there is little to suggest that the long-term trend is for the gap to narrow.

The same surveys show that women workers report dissatisfaction too in respect of promotion and career development, face familiar problems of work-life balance, are more likely to work unpaid overtime, and participate less in private health and pensions schemes. Overall, it is a far-ranging but certainly not exhaustive x-ray of the anatomy of gender discrimination and inequality.

So deeply rooted are these realities in the world of work, so resistant to redress, that the conclusion is sometimes drawn that they are inevitable, or at least tolerable. No acts of violence in our societies are so widely committed or condoned as acts of violence against women. And no types of discrimination at work can be more prevalent or viewed with such wide acceptance or resignation as those of which women are victim.

So trade unions need to show that they must be ended and how they can be. And the good news is that we have a proven track record of making a difference. Where women have union representation and when they are covered by a collective agreement then they are better off.

But for our movement to do more, to make the maximum difference, it needs to ensure that it is fully responsive to the views and needs of working women, and that, in turn argues that women must be represented not only in rank and file union membership, but also in decision-making bodies and in leadership positions. If the aim is to improve the condition of women at work it would be the ultimate paradox if their condition in trade unions were to be an obstacle.

These are issues which have been the subject of very extensive discussion in the ITUC and its predecessor organisations, and sometimes those discussions have not been easy. It would be surprising if we were not to return to them in Vancouver. Whatever happens then, let's recall that the ITUC Constitution establishes its Women's Committee as one of just two standing statutory bodies and prescribes for women's participation in the General Council at Congress.

I believe it proper that the ITUC should, in this way, act as a locomotive for its affiliates – leading the way to acceptable levels of women's representation at all levels of trade unionism. And I think too that we have played that role. When the ITUC sets the standards we have generally been ahead for example of the levels of women's representation in workers' delegations to the International Labour Conference where decisions are in the hands of national centres and where we have, regrettably, too often come a poor third to governments and to employers.

Colleagues,

We go to Vancouver next June to continue what we started three years ago in Vienna at the founding Congress of the ITUC – the building of a new trade union internationalism. It is very much work in progress, but even in the short lifetime of the ITUC we have found ways to make our work more effective, to bring our international work closer to the everyday concerns and priorities of our affiliates, to make it more relevant and accessible to their members. We are doing this because we know that the methods and practices of the past wont necessarily work in the future and that in a world of work transformed by globalization it is pure illusion to believe we will progress by staying the same.

The challenges before this World Women's Conference are a good illustration of what I mean by this. If we commit to reaching out to the most disadvantaged and excluded of women then we must find new strategies for the informal economy. If we want to advance the organising agenda for women then where better to start than in the EPZ's and by making a success next year and the year after of a new ILO Convention on Domestic Workers? And so much else.

What the ITUC has shown – thanks to the energy and engagement of its affiliates - is that it is capable of innovation, that it knows how to tackle challenges ahead with confidence and with creativity.

The success of the 2nd World Day for Decent Work earlier this month showed what we can do. The way in which the ITUC has brought real influence to bear on the G-20 to pull us out of the global crisis and to put the global economy on a fairer sustainable track sends the same message.

So let me conclude by encouraging all of you to bring your energy, talent, commitment and above all your refusal to accept injustice to the same task. We have set ourselves high ambitions for the future of the ITUC. To realize these ambitions we need to put the cause of decent work and a decent life for women at the heart of our internationalism. And for that we need you to make this Conference a real success.

I wish you all the best and assure you that we will be eagerly awaiting the results you produce here in Brussels this week as really important inputs on the road to Vancouver.