

Report by Omid Rezai of International Alliance in Support of Workers in Iran on Labourstart Conference, Istanbul.

2011-11-24

“One Hundred Unions. Thirty Countries. One Class.”

Derek Blackadder, a Canadian Union of Public Employees' National Representative, advanced this as the slogan for trade unionists to take home. It was an accurate summation of the discussions and workshops of the last two days. It was an exciting conference to be part of. The *Internationale* was sung in more languages than I had ever heard spoken before, by avowedly class conscious labour activists, who were calling for international solidarity against capitalist exploitation.

The conference began with participants taking part in a picket line with 62 locked-out members of Birlisik Metal-Is, outside GEA Klima Sanayi ve Ticaret A.Ş. (ATR) in Gebze. Members of the International Alliance in Support of Workers in Iran took part and reported a lot of good feeling on the picket line as links were made between Metal-Is workers and German comrades who work at related factories. Full details of the dispute can be found here. (<http://www.imfmetal.org/index.cfm?c=28138&l=2>)

The tone of the conference was very militant. People from all over the world had come to talk about responses to the wave of radicalisations that have taken place since the New Year. Comrades from North Africa and the Middle East (Morocco, Egypt and Jordan) spoke on the first full day of the conference, to a packed main auditorium. What was apparent from the differing kinds of speeches given, was the differing levels of political strength of the working class movements in each country. On the one hand a comrade from Egypt discussed what the biggest lessons to their movement should be from the Iranian Revolution of 1979, whilst on the other a Moroccan Trade Union leader argued that the Moroccan working class had no need to struggle for the overthrow of the King. Neither did the fate of the Sahrawi peoples get mentioned, with one African participant describing it as “Africa’s last colony.”

The theme of the conference linked questions around the revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East to those around the autumn of riots and occupations in Europe and North America; “From social media to social revolution.” A workshop, “Echoes of the Arab Spring”, which featured an Israeli participant was criticized because of this, some Turkish comrades calling for a boycott and a “resolution” condemning Eric Lee and some others as Zionists. As Eric Lee and the Alliance for Worker’s Liberty point out (<http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2011/11/23/global-labour-conference-harmed-probds-campaign>) this is a nonsensical call, as the conference is not a decision making body. Whether this is an instance of “Jew hating”, as the same article calls it, is another question entirely. “Can someone, privileged by status as an occupier, participate in an authentic worker’s movement?” is as legitimate in regard to the situation in Western Sahara as it is in Palestine. The radical group of young Turkish militants, who are fighting for the unionization of casual workers and who the article dismisses as enthrall to some English ex-pat, were not the only voices of concern over the inclusion of Israeli activists. Such views were expressed all through discussions in and around workshops.

The inclusion of AFL-CIO backed Solidarity Centre, which has been linked to the coups in Haiti and Venezuela, was also a topic of debate. A debate we sought to galvanize, calling for organizations and activists to boycott it completely, as it is dependant on the aims, interests and financial support of the American ruling class.

The IASWI workshop itself was successful. To illustrate what can be achieved through genuine independent organizations; messages from independent Iranian worker's organizations were given to the conference.

Our workshop was made of three strands. I spoke on the history of the Iranian worker's movement from the Iranian Revolution of 1979 to the present day. I stressed that this is a portion of Iranian history which is often scrubbed from the historical record, not fitting the ideological stereotypes of Iranian history, which benefit only Imperialism and the current regime. I discussed the high water tide of worker's control of their lives and economies, as well as the rise of "Islamic Shoras" and "Worker's House" ,the problems caused by these government backed and sponsored scab "unions" and, finally, moved onto the International Alliance's campaign against them on the international level. I discussed the formation of new independent worker's organizations in Iran. We talked about organizing solidarity actions for Reza Shahabi, Ali Nejati and other imprisoned workers, audience members being keen to join the call for the immediate release of all workers and activists from Iranian jails.

Sediq Esmaili spoke next on the need for the worker's movement to organize independently of any capitalist government, outlining one of the fundamental arguments of our intervention in Istanbul. He argued that any link with a capitalist ruling class is a betrayal of international working class solidarity; you can't finance the fight of one section of worker's with value squeezed from another. He specifically attacked the Solidarity Centre's history, funding sources and its pro-capitalist strategic policies and practices. He furthermore warned against the Solidarity Centre's attempts to influence the newly free trade unions of Egypt and Tunisia. Sediq said that the Solidarity Centre have also sought to make overtures to the movement in Iran, but the historical development of the Iranian working class has necessitated the development of sharp analysis and they would not tolerate any group with links to this kind of organization, tied to the capitalist super power. This is of special importance in the Iranian context, insofar as the so-called "right opposition" to the regime parrot the line of capitalist governments, even to the extent of supporting Imperialist economic sanctions and military interventions against Iran. No one in the Iranian labour movement wants anything to do with the Solidarity Centre, its associates, or similar organizations and neither should other genuine, independent, working class organizations.

Farkhonde Ashena spoke about present working conditions in Iran, as well as the most pressing demands of the labour movement. She enumerated the attacks on pay and conditions at work, as well the social problems that blight the lives of poor and working people more broadly. It was interesting to note that the attacks on subsidies for the poor are embarked upon in language similar to that employed in Europe. The rest of this litany too struck a chord with labour militants from all over the world, as she spoke of advances in technology leading to deskilling, casualization, child labour, immigrant workers and racism as well as a phenomenon, as far as I am aware unique to Iran in

degree only, of the so-called “white signature” contract, signed by a worker with terms to be amended and made up as and when the boss says so.

Finally, a communiqué to the conference was read by Parvin Mohammadi, a representative of the Free Union of Workers in Iran. Many of the same themes that emerged from these had been echoed by militant participants in different workshops and discussions. Most clearly the ringing call for new international workers organizations, globalizing the struggle, was sounded. With the occupations on one side and the revolutions on the other, these messages spoke of the beginning of a new phase of struggle. In Europe, North America, the Middle East and Africa whole new generations have had to teach themselves the methods of mass organization and, in doing so, have brought a whole arsenal of new technologies and techniques into working class politics.

During the final plenary session, participants spoke to the whole conference to provide a summary of workshops. A quick summary of our discussion was made by a supporter of IASWI who underlined what the workshop had discussed. He called for the creation of international solidarity independent of any government or capitalist body, emphasizing that such links are contrary to actual worker’s solidarity. He also talked about the situation of workers in Iran and their inspiring fight and messages, participants showing a lot of interest in the cases of renewed militancy, as well the issue of imprisoned workers.

The message given from the Free Union of Workers in Iran struck a chord with a lot of what had been discussed in the conference and was, for me an inspiration. At its best this conference was not a place to call for solidarity; it was a place to put it together. The message closed;

Long live the Revolution of the People of the Middle East. Long live the Occupy Wall Street Movement.

Long live international working class solidarity.

Omid Rezai

24/11/2011