

OPENING STATEMENT OF THE TRADE UNION DELEGATION TO THE 12TH SESSION OF THE UN COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

(Statement delivered by Winston Gereluk, PSI, to the Official Meeting on Wednesday 21 April in Conference Rm. #1, United Nations, New York – Check against delivery)

Mr. Chairman. Honourable Delegates.

I am extremely honoured to deliver the Opening Statement of Workers and Trade Unions to this Session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development.

Trade unions have been part of this Commission ever since it was established in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. I attended my first Session nine years ago, and am pleased to comment on the general progress that I and my fellow trade unionists have observed with respect to our trade union priorities during that period.

Nine years ago, when I attended my first meeting, words such as ‘worker’, ‘workplace’ and ‘trade unions’ did not appear in the discussions or text from the proceedings of this Commission. Now they do – regularly. In fact, the World Summit in 2002 firmly established workers and workplaces, and trade union priorities must be a part of the agenda of this CSD and its member countries.

Unfortunately, too many national and local actors don’t know or understand trade unions. They continue to resist and avoid trade unions, instead of working with us. As a result, in 2004, we still remain a largely untapped potential for sustainable development.

You will notice in our literature, that we note– in contrast to a decade ago - that there is now a widespread belief amongst workers and trade union officers that we are ‘in trouble’, that today, every part of our world, the social fabric, the biosphere, is under stress. We are in a state of crisis, and simply can’t carry on business as usual.

Moreover, there is an understanding that sustainable development can no longer be left to assorted NGO’s, or governments, or UN agencies alone. Solutions to the current situation will require the participation of everybody – their inspired, wholehearted participation – if we are to reverse the trends that are bringing us face-to-face with disaster. In this context, why wouldn’t you want to cooperate with and support trade unions, to unleash the power of over 150 million unionized workers on over 2 million workplaces?

Trade unions have traditions and capacity to speak directly to the problem, but we can do so much more. The delegate from Iran mentioned ‘education for the people’. I would respond that workers should be especially targeted for education, because they are on the front-line of production, consumption and service delivery, and empowering them would bring concrete benefits for sustainable development.

Over the years, trade unions have developed a global network for education, making us the largest single provider of adult education in the world. This is a huge education system that has been organized, paid for and belongs to workers. It provides them with education that is relevant, up-to-date and accessible to men and women alike. Why wouldn’t you seek to utilize this resource as fully as possible?

Unions exist to protect the rights and interests of their workers. At the same time, we speak for all workers, both in workplace and community. Slowly and surely, trade unions

around the world are placing sustainable development on their agendas – but we need your support. We believe that we deserve it.

You will notice in our literature, that we express considerable concern about the direction of government involvement. Since Rio, we have noticed a steady retreat of governments from the provision of services associated with water, sanitation and human settlements – services that are essential to sustainable workplaces and communities.

Governments, in fact, are steadily retreating from providing much of their responsibilities for Agenda 21, the JPOI, and other international agreements. They are handing it off to other groups, and to the market – with the presumption that market-based approaches can supply the solution to all of our problems. Trade unions have the research and knowledge to back up their contention that this is a mistake.

In our literature, we refer to Corporate Social Responsibility. We have watched the growth of a ‘CSR Bubble’, and we applaud much about this, because it means that corporations which subscribe to it are at least expressing the right intentions. We can only hope that this trend eventually leads to full-scale Corporate Accountability.

At the same time, I am sure you know that trade unions express a lot of skepticism, pessimism and distrust about CSR. We have seen far too many cases where it is simply an exercise in PR – ‘greenwashing’ and cover-up. We know that corporate managers face demands of the financial analysts, that they are judged on financial record, not on social responsibility. For CSR to work, corporations require an enabling environment that will recognize and reward them for responsible performance. This must include strong regulation.

IN CLOSING, let me remind you that our international labour body, the ICFTU, was born and grew up in exactly the same historical period as the United Nations itself. This was the period following the Second World War, in which there was widespread hope and exuberance – the feeling that, working together, we could indeed build the better world we all want.

Since then, there have been disappointments and setbacks of course. However, I want to assure you Mr. Chairman, and through you the assembled delegates, that trade unions continue to support the United Nations and this Commission of Sustainable Development.

We believe in you, and will continue to work with you.

All we ask is that the CSD and its member countries believe in and support workers and trade unions.

Thank you.