

## Regulated burden-sharing ?

Wolfgang Schaumberg on the global strategy of the DGB and the IGM leadership

„The European discussion about longer working hours has direct consequences for employees in Brazil. In Germany companies want to increase work time from 35 to 40 hours. In Brazil people are trying to shorten their working hours down to 40 from 48 or more hours – but now, unions are being told - even in a rich country like Germany - that employees will have to work longer. In such cases, exchanging information within our Unilever-Network guarantees that they are less able to divide us. This makes us stronger in every land: Don`t let yourselves be fooled by the claim that things are worse in other countries and nothing else there is possible. The better you understand globalization, the more self confidence you have: We have to use these opportunities instead of just constantly trying to find out what`s going on in our own plant.“ This is how Patrick van Klink, a worker and member of the works council at Unilever Rotterdam describes his experiences within the worldwide network of works councils and trade unions at Unilever. This quote is part of an interview in a very interesting brochure on the global aims and practices of the DGB and the IG Metall: „Real Social Responsibility – Rules for Multinational Companies“ published in 2005.

Van Klink emphasizes the necessity „to understand globalization“ and „to be aware of the opportunities“ it presents (page 27). What understanding of globalization do the DGB and the IGM provide in their publication? What does „to be aware of the opportunities“ it presents mean among these trade union leaders concretely?

I.

„To be able to pass on information quickly within corporations, contact must be established between locations in each country, but also within entire regions“ (p.15). The European and world works councils (currently there are ten of them) are said to best serve this purpose, especially the world works council at VW: „In the field of co-determination the German car-builder was always a step ahead“. Worldwide the VW workers are well-organized. Robert Steiert from the International Metalworkers' Federation – and at the same time the IGM`s trustee for the VW world works council - is quoted as saying: „A manager in Mexico must always be aware that his employees will appeal to the world works council if he does not follow the rules“.

Because all VW managers must follow the international framework agreement ratified by the VW world works council - and meanwhile by 17 other transnational corporations in the IGM`s jurisdiction. The

international framework agreements are the center piece of labor`s global strategy and are the focus of this brochure. „We hope it will be 25 soon“, Bert Thierron, the IGM`s international representative, is quoted as saying. The basic norms of the International Labor Organisation (ILO) always lie at the core of these agreements.

„These agreements generally include language covering human rights, discrimination, child and forced labor, the right to organize, fair wages, safe working conditions and humane working hours (p.14)“.

So far, so good.

Those who always complain that „the trade unions have to become active internationally“ must recognize the activities that are already taking place; the trade unions are not „without a strategy“ or even „helpless“. After all, the DGB and the IGM both belong to the ICFTU with its 155 million members in 236 affiliated organisations across 154 countries. Presently the ICFTU is campaigning worldwide to establish further agreements (p.29). The goal is that these agreements become mandatory for all corporations, instead of being voluntary. „The state carries the main responsibility (...) At it`s core, it is about achieving a binding, transnational regulation to push forward the social dimension of globalizaiton, which is still missing today“. This is the description of the political and ideological orientation of the official union internationalism following Jürgen Peters, IGM Chairman and Dieter Hexel, chairman of the DGB Education Department. The aspirations of trade union members are diverted instead to the reaching better regulation transnationally, to achieve a „social dimension of globalization“ through „rules of good behaviour“ for multinational corporations and their suppliers.

That the ILO's basic norms must be honoured worldwide is a claim that can be supported. That corporations abuse voluntary agreements as a part of their CSR strategy for public relations purposes and for advertising is bemoaned page after page in the brochure, as well as the fact that these agreements are barely enforceable.

So far, so questionable.

II.

„By signing a framework agreement, corporations also recognize social partnership on an international level“ writes Claudia Rahman from the international department of the IGM. It looks as if capitalist globalization could be brought under control through a global social partnership – either through agreements with corporations or through state regulations. Reasonable employers are apparently already voluntarily on the way there. Because „companies also profit from such agreements Studies have shown that when labor relations improve,

productivity increases. Improvements in health and safety conditions, in wages and worktime strengthen the companies relations with its employees and thus, nearly always influence the quality of the production. But even with such advantages, realization of agreements is moving slowly“ says Claudia Rahman. Thomas Schlenz, chairman of the Thyssen-Krupp corporate works council, argues similarly when praising cooperation with Brazilian union representatives: „The company also profits from this cooperation. The number of strike days in Brazil has decreased significantly. The company's image is improving“ (p.25). According to this view, international contact between workers, European and world works councils and companywide agreements will regulate globalization in such a way that working people, shareholders and their managers will all profit.

### III.

Therefore, there is no reason to be astonished when one recognizes that the DGB/IGM brochure calls for a more conscientious attitude on the part of consumers, rather than for educating union members and employees of transnational corporations about the character of globalization and for mobilizing them in a struggle around common goals. The strongly promoted information networks exist to strengthen the bargaining power of social partners and make strikes and other struggles less necessary. Consequently the real work of trade unions against the attacks of transnationals is organized in a way that the chairman of the European works council of GM/Opel, Klaus Franz describes as following: „The slogan is: a shared burden is half a burden!“ (Frankfurter Rundschau 6/9/2005).

Principally, management's problems with costs, and profits, are to be respected, and each workforce locally has a part to play in paying the bill; the burden has to be shared. The main thing is that competitiveness and profitability remain unquestioned. In the brochure the ideal global example is Volkswagen, as the then chairman of the IGM Klaus Zwickel said at the union delegate's conference on April 11, 2002, organized to prepare for elections to the supervisory board: „A company that is able to combine trade union interests, business success as well as individual and societal questions is very unusual“ (not published, p.1). Workers on assembly lines and on the machines at VW would certainly be able to say a lot about if and how such highly praised agreements result in gains like „the right to fair wages, healthy working conditions and humane worktime“, at least in German plants...

### IV.

What can be understood by „fair wages“? To survive, the mass of people worldwide must sell their labor to private owners of corporations; these

owners are forced to bring their production in line with the need to maximize profits in the „competition war“ and not with producing necessary goods or with „healthy working conditions and humane worktime“. These basic truths make clear that globalization is a capitalist one, and become invisible in the brochure in the fog of dreams of social partnership.

But if we understand globalization as a capitalistic, forced development and then ask – as the Unilever worker did – if and how opportunities can be recognized and taken advantage of, another debate about the future will emerge. One that we only want to mention briefly here:

For example: If VW invests in China a not-so-small number of people will have the advantage of receiving a better price for their labor, probably better working conditions and even more democratic rights than in many Chinese companies. That`s good: People can finally come a bit nearer to the standard of living that is shown daily in TV as typical for the advanced industrialized countries. Among the people surrounding those employed by transnationals and their suppliers, the wish to have a comparable life is also increasing – 200 million migrant workers are passing on their experiences to their own people among the more than 700 million-strong rural population. At the same time there is a growing discontent, because such a life is increasingly less possible for everybody. Chinese leadership already officially admits that the gap between rich and poor is widening - as it is here. Also, there is already a public discussion about the fact that growing consumerism is linked to an idea of growth that is causing dangerous new problems through environmental devastation.

More than a fifth of the worlds population lives in China, and is quickly learning not only the most modern methods of production, but also the typical antagonism of private capitalist production like sped-up production, pressure on wages as well as the lie of a people-centered production. Demanding shorter worktime will emerge as a result of both experience in production and of the problem of unemployment. The increasing mass resistance among Chinese workers is already officially acknowledged and discussed in the papers. Also in China the question of a fundamental solution to these increasing contradictions will become more pressing.

In China as well, the rise of transnational capital has led to more and more young people learning English. The internet is increasingly used for international exchange, even if only a few use the new communication technologies to debate what „another world“ could look like. It is quite likely that more people from China will participate in the WSF with the slogan „Another World is Possible“ and will exercise pressure to be able

to participate.

With the example of China it becomes clear how capital connects people worldwide by forcing them to deal with the same contradictions and problems – while at the same time creating the explosive potential that we can use to defeat it.

The hope for a welfare-state regulation of capitalist globalization is senseless. Of course it makes sense to criticise its brutal consequences and explain its causes, even if this alone doesn't offer us much hope. Instead, the chance to exchange with more people worldwide about other forms of living together and about the production of necessary and desired things may offer more hope. If by doing so, we can approach a feasible vision, the indignation at capitalism's attacks can become the fury that leads to going after the cause at its very roots.

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(1)Cf. W. Schaumberg „Another World – is it possible?- Steps to a concrete vision“ also published in LabourNet Germany

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