

Revolutionary Labor Conferences

Mike Hargis

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XIXth Congress of the International Workers Association (IWA/AIT)

The 19th Congress of the IWA took place on April 17–19 in Koln, Germany. Attending the congress were delegates and observers from some 15 countries, including IWA sections from Argentina, (FORA), Brazil (COB), Bulgaria (CNT), England (DAM), France (CNT), Germany (CNT), Italy (USI) Norway (NKS), Spain (CNT), and the United States (WSA), as well as delegations from Finland (SAL, which became an IWA section at this congress), ex-Soviet Union (ILA and SMOT), Bolivia (COB), and individuals representing a number of organizations from Holland, Mongolia and Switzerland. Australian, Danish and Japanese sections were unable to send delegates.

The three-day congress included reports from the various sections on the situation in their respective countries and the activity of their organizations since the last Congress, illustrating growth in the quality and amount of work being carried out.

Taking place within a context of “really existing socialism” in the “east,” the delegates were well aware of the challenge being posed by the new lease on life being granted to the ideology of liberal capitalism and the alarming growth in nationalism and racism being experienced all over Europe. Add to this the continuing slide of really existing capitalism into crisis, with its accompanying poverty and misery, and you have the makings for an increasingly explosive situation. The challenge for the future is for the IWA to develop a role for itself in posing a global political alternative to this situation.

In its final act the congress voted to move its secretariat to Spain. (based on report published in *Lotta di Classe*, May-June 1992)

Italian Libertarian Workers' Conference

Over 100 anarchist and libertarian workers gathered June 28 for an assembly in Bologna, Italy. The conference objective was to develop a dialogue around the libertarian workers' experiences within the labor movement since the late seventies and to draw some conclusions concerning strategy and tactics from those experiences.

Three positions confronted one another at the assembly: “boring from within,” revolutionary syndicalism, and (for lack of a better term) “basism.”

The first position was represented by comrades working within the left-wing of the Italian General Confederation of Labor (CGIL), the trade union influenced historically by the Communist Party. These fellow workers made the hoary argument that it would be a mistake to abandon the major mass organization of the working class and that through this organization they could more effectively defend the interests of the workers in regard to wages, automation, the right to strike, and trade union democracy.

Fellow workers from the Italian Syndicalist Union (USI), Italian section of the International Workers Association, argued on the other hand for the need to create specifically revolutionary, self-managed unions within the work-place. revolutionary unions that recognize the internationalization of class conflicts. Such unions are needed not only as an alternative to the reformism of the bureaucratic unions, but also to struggle against the fragmentation and corporatism that have hampered the rank-and-file movements represented by the base committees.

Comrades active within the base committee movement, on the other hand, argued that it was necessary for anarchist and libertarian workers to remain within these organizations of the masses in order to move them in a libertarian direction and to oppose their bureaucratization. These organizations, after all, have been the main expression of workers' autonomous struggles in the last few years.

Needless to say, this one conference was not able to resolve the different positions; however it was decided to do the following: 1) prepare a map of the libertarian presence and alternative unions in the various industrial sectors; 2) to deepen the analysis of the restructuring process that is taking place in specific sectors as well as within the general economy; 3) to develop instruments for continuing the dialogue begun at the conference, such as a regular page in *Umanita Nova*, the bi-weekly newspaper produced by the Italian Anarchist Federation (FAI); 4) to pay more attention to new problems, such as co-management, toyotatism and the "new industrial relations," with an eye to developing consensus among libertarians on how to approach them. (based on a report of the conference by Renato Strumia appearing in *Umanita Nova*, July 12, 1992).

The IXth Congress of Workers Affiliated with the Central Obreros Boliviana (COB)

Taking place in a context of narco-trafficking, increasing poverty and new threats of military coups attacking the weak and ineffective "democracies" in Bolivia and Latin America, this 9th congress of the Bolivian Workers' Central drew over 1,000 delegates from all over the country.

Controversies emerged early around the seating of delegations. Some delegations, such as those of the oil industry, were challenged because of the involvement of their leaderships in governmental structures against this wishes of their rank-and-files or because they involved themselves with the Free Labor Institute, the notorious AFL-CIA's (sic) trade union front. On the other hand, the organizations of fired miners and peasant women demanded to be seated because they did not feel represented by their respective unions. At one point the delegations of the manufacturing sector, railroads and banks abandoned the meeting demanding that a fifth COB vice-presidency, to be occupied by a representative of the manufacturing sector unions, be established.

The COB leadership emphasized a number of areas in its report: the necessity to amplify workers' class struggle, implanting the trade union struggle in the center of national preoccupations, the full participation of workers in the process of structural reforms (both institutional and legal), as well as the political constitution of the state itself. The great challenge is to make the union movement a central part of a great popular movement that can struggle against increasing poverty and misery; that can impede the dogmatic brutality of the market, with its accompanying unlimited individual greed and unemployment, and instead promote collective contracting and labor stability; that can stem the assault of the new agribusiness on rural property, that can get better credit terms for campesinos, artisans and small businesses; that defends communal property and the right to land and territory of the indigenous peoples. A movement that is aware of the progressive erosion of democratic institutions. Victor Lopez Arias, a miner of the independent current and, until this congress, executive secretary of the COB, presented a document indicting the neo-liberal economic model of capitalism that now engulfs the globe with particularly disastrous consequences for the so-called Third World. The document points the accusing

finger at the International Monetary Fund, which continues to impose its conditions resulting in tremendous upheaval underscored by the recent riots in Venezuela and outbreaks in Argentina and Brazil, increasing levels of unemployment, the desertion of the student population and the renewed spread of epidemics.

Not surprisingly in this year of the 500th anniversary of the European invasion of the western hemisphere, one of the important features of this congress was the challenge poised by the peasant organizations, tied as closely as they are to the organizations of indigenous peoples, to the “workerist” basis of the COB and the vanguard role played by the mineworkers union. The campesinos put their challenge forward in a document, “Struggling for a multi-national and multi-cultural state.”

The commission on economics reviewed developments over the past 5 years and recommended a struggle against privatization and condemned the free market. They also recommended a new indexation of wages based on a family floor of \$400 per month (currently at \$100 per month). The question of “decentralization” of the state administration in Bolivia was opposed as reinforcing neo-liberalism.

The campesinos brought up the question of depenalizing the cultivation of coca, which provides a subsistence livelihood for some 122,000 people. Attempts to stop the cultivation of the leaf is seen as capitulation to the hypocritical policies of the United States and an encroachment on Bolivia’s national independence.

The COB adopted a program to guide workers’ struggles over the next two years, “From active resistance to subversive resistance.” Active resistance on the part of the masses is not enough, and must pass into subversive resistance that will form concrete instances of popular rebellion. Subversive resistance consists in destroying the controlled democratic order. Active resistance has to involve all the people, and this has been lacking. The strategic platform (a decidedly left social-democratic, almost bolshevik, program–CNT ed.) is:

1. to defeat the native oligarchy, capitalism and imperialism;
2. to construct a multi-cultural and multi-national socialist state, inclusive of all the nations that inhabit Bolivian territory;
3. to elaborate an independent economy;
4. to impel regional development in harmony with national development;
5. to recover the national resources, nationalize the medium-sized mines and re-nationalize the oil industry;
6. to satisfy the banks and foreign trade;
7. to execute a generous agrarian program;
8. to fund a unique, free and universal health service;
9. to socialize housing;
10. to preserve the cultivation of coca and seek a solution to the problem of narcotics-trafficking and the informal economy that benefits popular sectors;

11. to organize a school for liberation that is bilingual and inter-cultural;
12. to obtain sovereignty, territory, self-determination and rights for the nationalities and indigenous peoples;
13. to develop a sovereign international policy in solidarity with peoples struggling for their liberation.

The election of the COB's new leadership revealed deep divisions within the organization. The election of Oscar Salas Moya, a miner, ex-militant of the communist party, and now a member of the executive of the Democratic Socialist Alliance (ASD) to the post of executive secretary led to a walkout by the miners delegation led by Victor Lopez Arias. The charge has been made that Moya's election was the result of a deal put together by delegates affiliated with the ASD, the MBL (Bolivian president Jaime Paz's Movimiento Bolivia Libre, a split from the MIR), CONDEPA (conscience of the country, a populist movement with strong prospects in the 1993 elections), and delegates supporting the MIR (Movimiento Revolucionario de Izquierda, in the government) and UCD (Union Civica Democratica, another populist movement led by the owner of one of Bolivia's largest breweries). The miners' walkout seriously threatens the COB's unity at a crucial time, and the delegations of campesinos and other sectors vowed to convoke an extraordinary congress to resolve the situation. For its part, the miners assured that their delegation's actions would be discussed by the rank and file. (based on report by Miguel Quintanilla in CNT, October 1992).

Organizing is Focus of 1992 IWW Assembly

Eighty-seven members of the Industrial Workers of the World from throughout the U.S., Canada, Australia and Brazil gathered at a rural campground north of Ann Arbor, Michigan over the Labor Day weekend for the union's annual General Assembly. The focus of this year's assembly was organizing, given the apparent upsurge in such activity over the past few years.

Reports from the various branches indicated that there were organizing efforts currently attempting to reach nurses, timber workers, graduate students, models and dancers, publishing workers, hotel workers, stage hands, food coops, bike messengers, maintenance workers, bookstore workers, drivers, musicians, farmworkers, grocery workers and homeless people. The most pressing campaigns presently involve strikes/lockouts involving janitorial workers at the End-Up Bar (a gay bar in San Francisco, Calif.) and gaming house workers at Boulevard Bingo in Bethlehem, Penn. Both of these struggles have been ongoing for several months with no immediate end in sight. New General Membership Branches (geographically based) have been established in Philadelphia, Penn., and in Winnipeg, Manitoba, while new Job Branches (workplace based) have been implanted at Wooden Shoe Books (a worker owned/operated business in Philadelphia) and at University of California at Berkeley Recyclers (recycling contractors). In addition, some progress has been made in establishing industrial networks among distribution, education and entertainment workers.

While this year's assembly appeared to be rather harmonious as compared to some of the recent past, there were still undercurrents of division as to the direction in which the IWW should be headed. When the topic of direct action and organizing came to the fore, there emerged an apparent rift in the assembly between what could be called the "globalists" (those who see the

IWW as an umbrella for every “good” cause) and the “workerists” (those who feel that the IWW should stick to what it was set up to do. organize workers on the job). Indeed, there turned out to be two simultaneous workshops on direct action and organizing with two distinct focuses and two distinct styles.

The “globalist” workshop, according to Assembly participants I spoke with, dealt more with community and environmental issues and was organized in such a way that only a select group of “activists,” sitting in the center of a circle, were allowed to speak while an outer circle of observers looked on. The “workerists,” on the other hand, dealt with on-the-job concerns and all were allowed to participate. If, indeed, this is the way it went down, the obviously the “crisis of identity” that has afflicted the IWW for the past decade is far from over.

Besides the reports and discussion on the organizing front, a number of resolutions of interest were dealt with at the assembly. One on international policy re-affirmed the union’s commitment to developing stronger international ties both with the International Workers Association (IWA/AIT) and other independent revolutionary syndicalist organizations. The resolution called for the election of a standing International Commission which would be responsible for developing the IWW’s international contacts and continuing to explore affiliation with the IWA. The commission’s mandate would run out six months after the 1996 IWA Congress.

[A referendum to ratify this proposal is being voted upon as we go to press. The Assembly also approved resolutions calling upon the IWW office to give “the highest priority” to facilitating the IWW’s democratic process (many delegates objected to the office’s failure to issue ballots and monthly internal bulletins, among other criticisms); reaffirmed that General Membership Branches are local entities (some members have sought to establish branches spanning hundreds of miles); and clarified last year’s resolution withdrawing the IWW’s 1986 Report on Hostile Activities Against the IWW. specifying that its contents had not been disavowed: “The theft of IWW funds, slander and other activities it documents are unacceptable. It is, however, our hope to put these incidents behind us as we work to encourage greater unity among revolutionary unionists around the world.”]

All in all, the outcome of the 1992 IWW Assembly shows continuing activity on the organizational front, along with a continuing confusion as to the identity and direction of the revolutionary union. (based on reports in the October 1992 Industrial Worker and discussions with participants).

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