

Women of Steel Conference 2010

USW and Unite women activists came together at the USW's Women of Steel Conference in Pittsburgh in October 2010.

Leeann Anderson, of the United Steelworkers (USW), explained simply and succinctly why the USW International Women's Conference last fall needed to be international and why it is crucial for unions in developed countries like Great Britain, Ireland, the United States and Canada to aid women and all workers in less developed nations.

"This is really about confronting global capital," said Leeann, special assistant to United Steelworkers (USW) President Leo Gerard. "We know now the money flows around the globe, and we as trade unions need to be a global force to confront that."

Leeann spoke to 1,000 delegates from across North America and special representatives from Liberia, the U.K. and Ireland who were gathered for four days at the conference held in the David L. Lawrence Convention Center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Her summation and exhortation to global union activism launched a series of speakers who described the need for concerted action between developed and underdeveloped nations to aid women, workers and families. They also detailed successes in doing that by the USW, Unite, the U.K.'s largest union, and Workers Uniting, the first global trade union, which was created by a merger of Unite and the USW.

For example, Diana Holland, Assistant General Secretary of Unite, told the delegation that in this 100-year anniversary of the designation of March 8th as International Women's Day "it is time to redouble our efforts against discrimination and inequality, to make sure we don't go back."

Women unionists must strive to do that in their home countries and for women workers worldwide, she said, and described the efforts of Unite to help persuade the International Labor Organization to develop standards for domestic workers, who are mostly women.

Similarly, Barbara Briggs, of The Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights, formerly the National Labor Committee (NLC), told the assembly: "Through our transnational corporations, we are tied together with the poorest workers in the world. We need to reach out to them so that all of us have a chance for decent and safe working conditions, a decent wage and to be able to raise our families in a decent way and send our kids to school."

The institute succeeded in aiding the mostly women garment workers from the R.L. Denim factory in Bangladesh who contacted NLC a year ago. These workers were earning 17 cents an hour or less, laboring as long as 14 hours a day, often seven days a week. One woman died at her work station, and a young man was kicked by a supervisor after he fell unconscious, Briggs said.

continued overleaf

Addressing the conference (from top):
Leeann Anderson, Diana Holland, Barbara Briggs, Carol Landry



The NLC discovered that 80 percent of the clothing the workers produced was sold at Metro Group, a popular retail chain in Europe and England, and enlisted help from the USW and Unite. Unite and its German counterpart, Verdi, complained to the press.

Metro Group responded by threatening to withdraw all of its orders from the factory, Briggs said. The Women of Steel, an activist organization of USW women, wrote hundreds of letters to the retailer explaining that it needed to demand improvements in conditions at the factory, not throw the women there out of work.

And that's what happened, Briggs said. Abusive managers were fired. The factory was cleaned and forced overtime was ended. Now the institute is helping garment workers across Bangladesh form unions, Briggs reported.

The institute continues to assist Bangladeshi ship breakers – the men who take apart tankers and other decommissioned vessels.

Briggs told those at the conference about the deadly conditions under which these men work – killing one a month and seriously injuring one a day.

Her descriptions of the terrible deaths brought tears to the eyes of delegates, as did the stories told by another speaker, Stephen Lewis, co-director of Aids-Free World, USW.

Lewis noted that in 2000 the UN agreed to eight goals to be implemented by 2015 to close the gap between poverty in the less developed countries and privilege in the developed nations. "We are two-thirds of the way there, and we are not even close to achieving those goals in Africa, South Asia and Latin America," he told the delegates.

And he said: "Every single one of the goals speaks to women and the rights of women." He listed the goals, such as gender equality and reducing poverty, maternal mortality and child mortality, and told heartbreaking stories of the women and children

He recounted, for example, the case of a 14-year-old girl raising her four younger siblings in Uganda after they were orphaned by the AIDS epidemic. "I am the mother," he recalled the 14-year-old telling him.

He urged the assembly to work with him on these issues. Trade unions, he said, "are an important vehicle to uphold the rights of women around the world."

The USW's Women of Steel is doing that in its efforts to assist women in Liberia. WOS Director Ann Flener announced at the conference the launch of a new project – one to collect school supplies, children's books, and new and used clothing to ship to



Addressing the conference (from left): Stephen Lewis, Leo W. Gerard

women at the Firestone rubber plantation in Liberia. Workers there, who were grossly underpaid and lived in deplorable company-owned housing on the plantation, sought the aid of the USW. The USW and the AFL-CIO sent trainers and ultimately the plantation workers ousted the company-controlled union and secured a contract improving conditions.

Earlier in the four-day women's conference, USW President, Leo W. Gerard, helped introduce Los Mineros President Napoleon Gomez, who was forced out of his home country of Mexico by threats from the government and has been living in exile in Canada with the help of the USW, Unite, the International Metalworkers Federation and other unions and federations around the world.

"If there is a hero, a real labor hero in my lifetime that I know of, Napoleon is one of them," Mr. Gerard said, noting that Mr. Gomez has withstood death threats, political persecution, and separation from his family, his friends and his union brothers and sisters.

Mr. Gomez said international union solidarity has been crucial to his attempts to seek justice for Los Mineros. He thanked the international labor community and the Women of Steel for assisting him and his members in the "struggle for dignity, justice and respect – respect for union autonomy and labor rights in Mexico."

The bond between Los Mineros and unionists around the world illustrates the point that USW Vice President Carol Landry made early in the conference – that unionists worldwide must aid each other and all workers.

"We have a duty to this union and our daughters and sons to make this a better place, leave this world in a better place than we found it," Landry said.

She challenged the group to work to achieve the goal of "equality, dignity and respect for each sister here and around the world."

For more information on Women of Steel
<http://legacy.usw.org/usw/program/content/4889.php>

Women at Wapping!

by Ann Field

25 years ago, on 8th March 1986, a women's march took place from Tower Hill to Wellclose Square, opposite Fortress Wapping, to demonstrate the level of women's involvement in that horrendous struggle for jobs and union rights.

Search the press and media of the time, and the history books, and generally you'll see that only one woman was mentioned, and that was the general secretary of one of the unions involved, Brenda Dean.



In fact, over 600 women were sacked by Murdoch including editorial, admin, sales and cleaning staffs. Every photo of the enormous demos at Wapping, and the twice weekly events and daily pickets, show women workers, wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, friends, neighbours.

Murdoch didn't differentiate between the sexes – he sacked everyone who, as a loyal union member and citizen, stood up for their rights. The only women that News International were interested in were the ones who were prepared to take their clothes off to help sell copies of the Sun.

Ann Field is a former National Officer of Unite, Amicus and the GPMU





UNI Women's World Congress

by Terri Miller

In November 2010 I was lucky enough to attend the UNI Women's World Congress in Nagasaki Japan. UNI is a global Union federation that represents mainly service sector workers throughout the world.

Unite the Union in the UK is affiliated to UNI with representation by the Graphical Paper and Media sector and also the Finance sector. The 2010 World Women's Conference was attended by 441 delegates from 116 unions and 66 countries. It was fantastic to see so many women together in one place and in solidarity. The motions that were debated at this conference went on to the main World Congress and are now policies for UNI around the world.

Three of the main debates were: Women as Weapons of War, Global Finance Crisis and its impact on Women, and Gender Equality. During the debate on Women as Weapons of War, a sister from the Democratic Republic of Congo spoke from the heart as she described in detail the horrors, violence and abuse faced by women during times of war and that the rape of women was still regarded as a trophy of war. She described how during the abuse that takes place members of the women's families are also forced to watch or take part in the abuse.

I took part in the debate on Global Finance Crisis and its impact on women, during the debate I highlighted that the present Con-Dem Government and the UK's austerity measures had a disproportionate impact on women and went on to advise conference that the UK Coalition Government had no mandate from the people to carry out these measures. Speakers from Greece and France spoke about the actions they had been taking in their respective countries to campaign against the cuts that they were facing.

In the final debate on Gender Equality, UNI has upped the ante in its own federation. In an initiative to improve gender balance in decision-making structures and meetings at global, regional and sectoral level within UNI, a motion calling for all of the above committees to be made up of at least 40% women or 40% men, was submitted to the World Congress. This motion came with the full endorsement of the World Executive Board. The motion was passed at the main Congress as well.

This last motion is very important to all women, as for years we as women have been calling for more representation on committees and higher level jobs throughout, which applies to unions as well as jobs in the real world. It is an important change for us and especially for those women around the world who have no voice.

So for this International Women's Day let us remember all the women in the world, past, present and future, who have shown us through their battles what can be done and what can be achieved when we stand together.

Terri Miller is Vice Chair of the GPM National Industrial Sector Committee



Venezuela Shows Another Way

by Erica Carotenuto

The first thing that strikes those who arrive in Caracas from the airport is the sight of the immense barrios or shanty towns – minute houses that devour the steep slopes of the mountains surrounding Caracas – a sight of such magnitude that it defeats any description from a western pen, or keyboard, simply because in Europe there is hardly anything you can compare it with.

And after the feeling of astonishment, the second feeling that overwhelms the visitor is the poverty, and the immensity of the challenge facing a government that declares itself founded on the values of justice, universal solidarity and participatory democracy.

The following hours and days in Caracas proved to our UK delegation how, bypassing and in defiance of any neoliberalist recipe, the Chavez government has set itself on the way to tackle poverty, illiteracy and disease in an effective way, without the need of waiting and hoping for the market to 'adjust itself' and bring universal prosperity (while exacerbating social conflicts, inequality, environmental damage, criminality and unemployment).

By progressively taking control of the oil industry, the Venezuelan government has been able to keep the revenues coming from it within the country (instead of them ending up in foreign countries, leaving only low-end jobs to the local population) and reinvest them in social programs. Through those social programs the government has managed in a decade to slash in half the poverty rate, expanding universal education, increasing workers' participation and grassroots democracy.

A key step in this process has been, of course, that of paying back the debts to the IMF five years ahead of schedule, and withdrawing the country from the IMF and the World Bank, which has freed Venezuela from having to comply with the neoliberal structural-adjustment reforms required by those institutions.

I am not exaggerating by saying that this trip to Venezuela has been a life-changing experience. I found myself (as did others in the delegation) often feeling very moved, to the point of tears, by what I was witnessing. I feel very lucky to have had the opportunity to see first-hand that a different world is indeed possible, that we are not doomed to live in the neoliberalist trap, which is presented as the inevitable development of civilisation. The neoliberalist trap can be avoided, and, as many Venezuelan friends replied when jokingly asked how we could do it – it depends on us, we have to find the way.

Erica Carotenuto is a Unite member at the Oxford University Press



2011

www.internationalwomensday.com

International Women's Day

Tuesday, 8th March

Leading representative, Maureen Whelan, celebrates 30 years' union activity

by Alison Jones, Unite Regional Officer

Union representative, Maureen Whelan, is this year being honoured for her thirty years of activism within the Graphical, Paper & Media sector of Unite. Maureen has been active within Unite, and its various guides, since the 1980s when she started her career in the print industry at EE Fish in Liverpool. At this point she was one of two female SOGAT representatives before she changed workplaces and moved to JC Moores and now Thomas Loughlin Print Finishers where she continues to be an integral part of the union on site.

As a strong advocate of the trade union movement, Maureen has constantly dedicated her time, support and firm commitment to her members and this recently included volunteering to being a main witness in a tribunal claim against her present employer. Maureen is clear about what motivates her involvement in her union and says: "people question the relevance of trade unions today but I maintain that being part of an organisation that provides not only representation but also wishes to advance workers' interests will always have their place. Ironically, with the current climate, the movement could not be more necessary."

Maureen also recently had an opportunity to share her experiences with a colleague from our US sister union, the USW, as Ron Espinoza Staff Representative spent time with her, and her members, as part of an exchange programme. They discussed the common issues that face both Unite & USW members and how we can develop a strategy that can be used to secure the best deal for our respective members and deal with the challenges that they face. Discussing Workers Uniting they believed that the agreement signed in July 2008 between our unions was a historical document as it formalised our mutual commitment not only to our members

but to workers across nations going forward.

As part of the second leg of the exchange trip between Unite Officers and USW staff representatives, which involved observing and taking part in negotiations throughout the US before USW colleagues came to the UK in November 2010, I met up with my host and Staff Representative from



Maureen Whelan with Ron Espinoza



Maureen and Ron with GPM Sector reps in Liverpool

District 12, Ron Espinoza, to review the weeks' events and the Workers Uniting exchange programme.

We discussed the negotiations that I had attended and:

- solidarity in relation to collective bargaining,
- learning about each others political institutions and any influence we can use,
- co-ordinating strategies towards protecting workers jobs,
- encouraging participation of rank and file union members.

All of these objectives are necessary in achieving our aims and I have been extremely privileged to be part of this delegation alongside my colleagues that were placed in Wisconsin and British Columbia. Whilst I have been in California I have enjoyed taking part in negotiations, meeting USW activists, gaining knowledge on the union recognition process here and learning from face to face interaction. There may be legislative differences that can influence the emphasis of certain collective bargaining meetings, but basically workers' issues are workers' issues, despite the borders that separate us and I am proud to be part of the coming together of Unite and USW as we strive to make a difference.

Whilst I had the opportunity, I expressed to Leo Gerard how invaluable I believe the exchange programme between USW and Unite colleagues is and thanked him for supporting the initiatives that both unions are taking to truly make Workers Uniting a global union.

Unite

March For The Alternative

Unite the Union says no to unfair and unnecessary spending cuts which are damaging services and communities across the country.

Saturday 26th March • 11am
Assemble - Victoria Embankment, London
Regional transport is available for Unite members and their families

Join the march with thousands of others to send a message to the coalition government that there is an alternative to the spending cuts.



There is an alternative
Don't Break Britain
Saturday 26th March 11am
Unite

DON'T BREAK BRITAIN
CUTS KILL COMMUNITIES



For more information on the march and transport from your region please visit:
www.unitetheunion.org/marchforalternative

(UN3423) H8070111

