

# Priorities for the Future

Reg Green

Reg Green is the occupational health, safety and environment officer for the International Federation of Chemical, Energy and General Workers' Unions (ICEF). He occupied the same position in the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) leading up to and during the UNCED process and was responsible for coordinating the trade unions at the Earth Summit. The ICEF works closely with the ICFTU in matters of health, safety and the environment and represents workers worldwide in the chemical and process sectors of the industry.

*Trade Unions have been at the forefront of change for over a century, striving to improve and enhance working standards and conditions on behalf of workers. They are now addressing environmental issues on behalf of their members and working with environmental groups to improve the workplace and move away from the unsustainable development path which has been followed in the past.*

The Earth Summit was convened to address ways of tackling two of the world's most pressing and difficult problems; its burgeoning environmental difficulties and the economic development and security of its citizens, known collectively as sustainable development. Two key components contribute to sustainable development.

First, addressing the political and economic needs and aspirations of people – including working people – worldwide. Second – and most important – it depends upon the efforts of working people for its success.

Working people have an overriding interest in encouraging and promoting sustainable development and play a pivotal role in bringing it about. This point bears stressing as the environmental and developmental debate has shown little regard to date for the views of working people and their representative organisations. Listening to the comments of some of the protagonists in the debate, including the vast majority of those addressing the Earth Summit, one could be forgiven for thinking that economic development – sustainable or otherwise – is something which occurs separately from human and worker involvement. Workers and their trade unions will continue to oppose this thinking and ensure that they are fully involved in the future political processes dealing with the environment, particularly where it relates to the workplace and its immediate environs.

Even had the Earth Summit ended on a more positive note, with rich and poor nations recognising their mutual rights and responsibilities, the resulting high level political statements and commitments would still have to be put into effect at the national, local and, ultimately, workplace level. Fine

words would (and will) have to be translated into meaningful action.

Workers and their trade unions know only too well the cost of lengthy government deliberations or of international government agreements. They understand only too well the relationships between politics and their broader interest.

Workers and trade unions know that polluting plants and processes are socially and environmentally unacceptable. They are aware of the unsustainable values and unacceptable morals of a world where a minority live in relative comfort and security and the great majority are compelled to eke out a living devoid of any social safety net and all too frequently bereft of legal and human, including trade union, rights. Trade unions have been fighting these injustices for over one hundred years.

Workers know what can be done to help eradicate or alleviate problems whether in connection with health and safety protection or pollution prevention and mitigation. However, their demands are frequently met with the response that raising health and safety standards or that introducing stricter controls would be too expensive or threaten and/or cost jobs. Indeed, in a world where transnational corporations are able to shift capital and production to countries with lower standards of worker and environmental protection, this is now a very real threat.

These are the political realities facing many workers. As individuals their power is limited, but as members of trade unions they have learned their effectiveness. Workers organised in trade unions have taken a leading role in achieving protective legislation such as enhanced social security, medical cover, protection against arbitrary decisions and victimisation and the promotion of international solidarity. It has been organised workers who have fought for and won improvements in health and safety standards and, increasingly, in broader environmental standards. Indeed, trade unions are now fighting for environmental issues to form part of the normal collective bargaining process, for workers' representatives to be included on joint management/worker environment committees and to be included in workplace



environmental audits. Organised labour has a long and noble history of achieving progressive change, no other group has been more active in defending these changes.

Workers are in the front line when it comes to industrial accidents and illness; workers and their families are the most likely to be exposed to the effects of pollution, directly or indirectly. Terrible as its consequences were, Bhopal was no different in many ways from the risks to which countless millions of other workers all over the world are exposed – both at home and in the workplace; it is workers who are the first to spot a dangerous or damaging aspect of their work environment; it is workers who have the first hand knowledge and experience to formulate solutions; and it is workers who rely on a secure income for their survival and that of their families, and who therefore have a vested interest in the long term viability and

sustainability of their work activity.

Why, therefore, is it that those who have the single biggest interest in sustainable development and those upon whom its achievement will succeed or fail are largely excluded from participating in the decision-making processes? Because organised workers are effective and, by extension, inconvenient in the eyes of many governments and employers. Organised workers do not content themselves with making statements or calling for action. They are both prepared and able to take action in pursuit of their demands.

It was no coincidence that the few trade union representatives included in the government delegations at the Earth Summit came from those countries where organised labour is strong, legal and at least politically tolerated. It was with a strong sense of irony that these trade union representatives listened

to speeches about democracy and equality from some of the most oppressive, anti-union, undemocratic countries.

Increasingly, organised workers are joining with environmental groups to tackle workplace related environmental problems. The relationship between the two groups is still somewhat tentative, but there have been good examples of cooperation leading to improvements in both the workplace and the wider environment, together with the development of politically effective coalitions. This is an increasing recognition on the part of both groups that together they are more effective than apart.

The Earth Summit addressed a number of vital issues and must be considered an important milestone in the development of environmental thinking and the broader recognition of the close link between environment and development. At the same



time it served to highlight the substantially different and divergent standpoints which exist in the world.

In particular, it showed the extent of the gulf between the rich and the poor nations. Charges of 'environmental neo-colonialism' and of a massive lack of political will on the part of the highly industrialised countries were being made by the less developed countries. At the same time, many less developed countries were criticized by those in the highly industrialised world as being unwilling to recognise that, in a world of finite resources and exploding population, it will not be possible to follow the same unsustainable development path which has been pursued in the past.

The Earth Summit showed that unless one deals with political reality, the most impressive statements, agendas and manifestos will come to nothing. Unfortunately, it was precisely at the political level that the Summit was least successful. Getting agreement, in principle, on protecting the environment, on saving human life, on increasing the share of global prosperity to the poorer peoples of the world is relatively simple. This was proved in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. The difficulty lies

in achieving action. It is at this stage that one hears the global version of the old workplace argument, it is too expensive, it will cost jobs, the electorate would not stand for it. The message, despite grand speeches, appears to be 'business as usual' for many governments and businesses.

For workers and their trade unions the Earth Summit demonstrated once again that one cannot rely on others to make the decisions. Real change is unlikely to be generated from the top down, real change occurs from the bottom up. Responsibility for sustainable development is too important an issue to be left exclusively in the hands of governments thinking no further than the next election or with businesses whose principal concern is a favourable financial dividend at the end of each year.

Sustainable development is, above all, about the workplace and work activities. It is concerned with the needs of workers and their families, ensuring that their voices are presented in the decision making processes. Trade unions understand the political reasons why these rights are not automatically granted to workers as they also understand the limitations of international conferences such as the Earth Summit.

It is in the workplace where real and progressive changes can be made. Only a handful of governments who attended the Earth Summit recognised the important contribution to be made to sustainable development by organised labour. Other governments would do well to reflect on the tragic environmental and developmental legacy of Central and Eastern Europe and realise that hope for the future in this part of the world exists largely because workers gathered together in independent trade union organisations to defeat the corrupt, undemocratic and unsustainable governments of the region.

For all the work put into the Earth Summit by the UNCED secretariat, and for all the effort that the secretariat made to try to gather as many views as possible, there will be no positive outcome for either the environment or for development unless the political realities are addressed. Sustainable development is not only about the environment and economic development, it is about human – including trade union – rights, widespread democratic political enfranchisement, participation, accountability, and an understanding and acceptance of cultural differences.

The trade union movement has followed the whole UNCED process with interest and participated where possible. It intends to continue to participate where practicable. But the post-Earth Summit feeling within trade unions is that the future lies with those who are capable of organising the necessary changes at the level of the individual and in the workplace and building on this foundation.

Trade unions are already including environmental protection in their collective bargaining with employers; they are demanding rights for workers and their trade union representatives to sit on joint management/worker environment committees; they are insisting on the right to take place in workplace environmental audits and on the right to refuse to undertake dangerous or environmentally damaging work. They are not short of ideas and are willing to work with those who are genuinely interested in making the world a better place for all its citizens.