



# *the* **ICFTU** *in* **South Africa**

KARL VON HOLDT and SNUKI ZIKALALA spoke to members of the ICFTU delegation which visited South Africa recently.

**Enzo Friso**, general secretary of International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), believes that if violence which is going on unabated is not stopped, there will be an explosion in South Africa. On the question of COSATU's affiliation to the ICFTU, he says: "I am not really interested in affiliation. We will help trade unions even if we differ and they have wrong perceptions about us. It is not the first time we are helping organisations which are not affiliated. It is our duty to help those who are still fighting for freedom and democracy."

He said the fact that he had come with the biggest delegation that the ICFTU has ever sent anywhere shows how seriously it takes COSATU and NACTU and the concern it has about the violence.

However, it is well known that ICFTU is extremely keen for COSATU to affiliate. What is the significance of COSATU for the international labour movement?

"The two need each other," says Friso. He believes that COSATU can play a very important role in strengthening weaker trade unions in Africa. "Its militancy and democratic principles would be an asset to the ICFTU."

The notion that the ICFTU is an imperialist organisation is wrong. "As the general secretary of ICFTU, I have been involved in negotiations and fighting against military

dictatorships in Latin America. I have been arrested, harassed and even went and lived illegally under very dangerous conditions in those countries. The main aim is to fight against dictatorships. What they are saying about the ICFTU is not true."

If COSATU says that it wants to change the ICFTU, that is accepted. "I am a progressive person myself. If they believe that they can make us more progressive, they are welcome."

What is important, according to Friso, is that all believe in one thing: independence. A union is a real union if it is independent from the government, political parties and employers.



Photos: William Matiala

### New challenges for the ICFTU

The world has changed tremendously over the past five years, both economically and politically. What new challenges does this pose for ICFTU?

Friso points to many new problems: rising unemployment in the industrialised countries, falling trade union membership, poverty and misery in the developing world.

In terms of exports, the industrialised countries have lost \$72 billion per year in the last five years. Two million jobs per year have been lost. Friso suggests this gives the workers of Europe and the US a real interest in promoting development in the rest of the world. Development would mean expanded markets and increased trade. "Developed countries will have to develop a real sense of solidarity, where everybody has to understand that the problem is a global one and needs a global approach."

**ICFTU and the struggle for democracy**  
Concretely, in what way can the ICFTU help

in solving the crisis? In struggling for the democratisation of the developing countries, says Friso. "The assistance which we once gave to official unions, used to go into the pockets of presidents like Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines and Papa Doc Duvalier. This money never reached the workers."

The ICFTU is no longer going to give assistance to trade unions which support a one party system. "It must now be targeted for the democratisation of those countries."

In the past, the ICFTU has not had a warm relationship with many of the militant new labour movements in the South. But CUT Brazil has now affiliated. The Korean Congress of Trade Unions has applied for affiliation, but is being opposed by the official 'yellow' trade union centre. How will ICFTU respond?

According to Friso, "The official trade union centre in Korea is organising a conference in March. KCTU will also be there and we hope that discussions on affiliation will be held."

Does ICFTU have a strategy for countering World Bank and IMF policies on deregulation and structural adjustments?

Friso says that the ICFTU is not happy with their policies of structural adjustment. "This policy has no principles."

The problem is that they seldom get in touch with those who represent the poor. "We want that before they impose their conditions on structural adjustment, they should listen and not only impose. We are now in contact with senior officials of the World Bank about this."

Friso believes that pressure can be exerted on the World Bank and the IMF. He says that policies of these organisations are determined by governments. "Our affiliates in each country must raise these issues, so the governments involved in formulating Bank and IMF policy must feel the pressure from the organisations in their respective countries."

He concluded by saying that, "you have to fight everywhere for trade union rights. First, get the guarantee to exist, then you make a philosophy." ♦

**Bob White**, president of the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) and chair of the ICFTU human rights committee, says that the confederation is facing enormous challenges. "The decline in trade union membership, the reduction of government support for international activities has had an impact on us."



**ICFTU**

### **New challenges**

White says that the challenges confronting the ICFTU are the new trading blocks, and the relations that the developed countries have with the least developed countries. The problem is that the economy of the industrial world is in trouble. "For example, in Canada unemployment is 11%. It is so easy now to pull back into your country and say that we have to deal with our issues domestically. I think that it is one of the main issues facing any international organisation."

These issues are raised for Canadian workers in a very concrete way by the establishment of the North American Free Trade Zone, which includes Canada, the US and Mexico. Multi-national corporations invest in Mexico, where unions are weak and wages low, rather than in the US or Canada. "The

Mexicans are saying: 'For us who do not have jobs, five dollars a day is better than no dollars per day.'"

This is the central problem facing labour internationalism – global capitalism tends to put workers in different countries in a competitive relation with each other. Investment goes where wages are lowest. What is the solution?

"Cheap labour cannot build a strong economy," says White. At the same time, the economies of the developed countries should not be destroyed. "Workers should not have to compete over the carcasses of a few jobs. If trade relationships are to work, workers in the new countries where jobs are going must have an income, not only to buy the products they are building, but to purchase from other countries so the flow of trade goes both ways."

### **How can the international labour movement make this happen?**

White believes that pressure can be exerted by the international and local organisations so that the multi-nationals pay a living wage.

"Fundamental to that is the building of trade union movements in those countries, so that the workers have a voice." He admits it is a long term solution.

National governments used to be one of the key instruments for intervening in the international economy. Now de-regulation of international trade and finance markets are undermining national sovereignty and the ability of governments to intervene.

White cannot accept "the notion that money has no borders, as if money does not belong to somebody. There is a person who takes investments out of one country and puts them in another country."

He rejects the idea that the democratically elected governments no longer have a role to play. Germany did not re-build its economy after the second world war with a deregulated

society. They had investment policies, infrastructure policies, trade union policies and social policies. Japan has a trading policy that builds their national base as well as their exports. "A totally deregulated world is an absolute disaster. It won't work. Thatcherism and Reaganism show that you lose your national base and the ability to compete in the world market."

To White the real place to confront these issues is in the national labour centres, at grassroots level in the ICFTU affiliates, and in the regional markets and trading blocks. "That's where the power is - you cannot proclaim it from Brussels."

He is also heartened by recent political developments. "If Bill Clinton can indicate that regulation is back on the agenda, if Canada does that, if the EEC realises that inside the community regulation is required - then you start to develop new international criteria."

What about the World Bank and the IMF? White concedes that in the past, the ICFTU has not been particularly challenging, but says this is changing. The ICFTU is now placing representatives in Washington to monitor the Bank and the IMF.

Finally, we asked Bob White and his colleague Rick Jackson, international director at CLC, about the relation of the ICFTU to the new militant unions of the South. Has ICFTU missed the boat by associating with the old, tired and undemocratic unions of those countries, rather than the dynamic new unions? They acknowledge that past criticism is legitimate, but believe it is changing. "The only way to change it is to be inside it. COSATU could be a major player in this process."

Jackson points out that CLC has been instrumental in having undemocratic centres expelled in Latin America. The same must happen in Africa and Asia. The

Malawian Congress of Trade Unions may be expelled because of its links with Banda.

Is it true that ICFTU blocks the affiliation of some progressive centres because only one centre from each country can affiliate? They say not, pointing out that CUT Brazil has been accepted. Both COSATU and NACTU could affiliate.

The ICFTU has been known to be very hostile to the KMU in the Philippines. Would it accept KMU affiliation now? According to Jackson, the KMU has never shown any interest in ICFTU affiliation. If it did, the main fact would be whether it has a democratic constitution. "There is unlikely to be an objection," he said. ♦

### **ICFTU visits SA**

In February COSATU and NACTU hosted the most high profile delegation ever to visit any country. This signals improving relations between ICFTU and COSATU in particular. Although COSATU maintains its official policy of 'active non-alignment', many believe it is not a case of whether it affiliates, but of when and how.

The delegation was in SA to investigate the violence wracking the country. It was led by ICFTU general secretary Enzo Friso and Canadian Labour Congress president Bob White. It included trade union leaders from the Scandinavian countries, Netherlands, Britain, US, Italy, Japan and Zambia. The ICFTU represents 164 national trade union centres with 113 million members in 117 countries.

In addition to travelling to different regions and meeting a wide range of organisations, the ICFTU Co-ordinating Committee on South Africa met in Johannesburg for the first time since it was formed in 1976. Representatives of a number of industry-based international trade secretariats (ITS's) were also present.

The meeting discussed the social, political and economic situation, the violence, the role of women in trade unions and an investment code for SA.

It also addressed the trade union situation in Malawi and Mozambique, as well as how international trade union assistance to SA unions could be co-ordinated. ♦

**Thomas Donahue**, treasurer of the US Labour Centre, the AFL-CIO, is "impressed by the debates going on in SA about the union structures, about relations with political parties, about the new concept of strategic unionism".



approach of the past, which is to organise work place by workplace, employer by employer, signing up people one at a time. To make up for our losses and to get back to a position of real strength in the economy we will have to organise millions of workers. I am not sure that you can do it one at a time." Donahue says that the labour movement needs to examine the possibility of centralised bargaining institutions similar to our industrial councils. "This will give us a structure through which we can organise members. It will be a structure which can affect an industry and can affect a large number of employers in order to get their attention."

Donahue says the AFL-CIO is proposing to Clinton that he establish a commission to examine this question.

The North American Free Trade Zone poses problems for US labour. The AFL-CIO has been losing members "as a result of industry restructuring and the movement of our manufacturing industry to Mexico and South East Asia. It is very clear to us what will happen under the free trade agreement. Mexican workers will be highly exploited, the environment destroyed and jobs taken from the US."

Donahue believes that it was an enormous mistake to establish a free trade agreement between two economies which are as unequal as that of Mexico and the US. The temptation for US companies to move to Mexico where they can pay low wages is too strong. "We had an obligation to provide aid and assistance to Mexico in an effort to build up the economy. At a point where the economies are equal you can talk about free trade regions."

Donahue hopes that Clinton's administration will help tackle this problem. "The president has spoken of giving incentives to those who invest and create jobs in the US". The labour movement is also campaigning against the implementation of the free trade agreements. ☆

**ICFTU**

According to Donahue, the US unions were some years in advance of the Australians in developing a programme to give the unions more voice in the economy and greater impact on society. Negotiations with the last democratic president, Jimmy Carter, were inconclusive, but Donahue believes Bill Clinton's new administration will be receptive.

According to Donahue, US labour law is extremely backward. Basic trade union rights are not protected by law. Legally striking workers can be permanently replaced. Maternity rights are also not protected by law.

"Clinton's administration has already said that it will support basic trade union rights, this year we are sure that the bill will become a law".

The US labour movement has lost hundreds of thousands of members through retrenchments and closures. "We have to look at this and ask, can we grow with the classic