

Address at the 22nd Congress of the Socialist International

27 October 2003

Chairperson,
Comrades and friends:

As has been indicated, this Panel is scheduled to discuss the topic of a new multilateralism for sustainable development and security. However it is impossible to comment on these matters without reference to matters that will be discussed by the other 8 Panels. You will therefore pardon us if we do not confine ourselves strictly within the bounds of whatever might have been expected of those of us sitting on this Panel.

Part of the theme of the Congress is "For Globalisation governed by the People". We do not believe that it would be possible to present a socialist perspective on the topic of this Panel until we have addressed precisely this matter - for globalisation governed by the people!

As socialists I am certain that we would all agree with this objective. I would also imagine that none of us would be satisfied merely to assert that this objective is desirable. We would be very interested that human society should evolve towards the situation where globalisation is actually governed by the people.

But how realistic is this dream, and how shall it be achieved, if we do not tamper with the current reality!

A central feature of the process of globalisation is the concentration and centralisation of power into ever fewer hands. We refer here to all forms of power - political, economic, military, technological, intellectual, information, and so on.

This is an objective social process. This concentration and centralisation of power was the subject of comment as early as the 19th century, by the same progressive actors who founded the socialist movement. It developed apace during the 20th century, gathering even greater speed in the latter part of that century, emerging both as a cause and a product of the process of globalisation.

Through natural growth, mergers and acquisitions, there have emerged powerful companies that play a major role in determining the future of the world. These include those who control financial capital. As experience has shown, when these shift from place to place what, to them, might be insignificant volumes of capital, economies of entire countries can be plunged into deep crisis, with large numbers of people losing jobs and many driven into poverty.

The process of the concentration and centralisation of capital has meant the continuous growth of the political power of the countries in which the headquarters of these global economic players are domiciled. The fact of the matter is that there is no government in the world today, which does not promote the global interests of its country's multinational corporations.

This results in a mutually reinforcing process. Whereas the economic strength of the multinationals gives weight to the international standing of their national governments, that political weight is, in turn, used to advance the global interests of the multinational corporations. Necessarily, those outside this equation find it very difficult to contest this combined political and economic power.

All this occurs during a period when neo-liberalism has come to occupy dominant positions in the global ideological and political discourse and right-wing parties seem to constitute the majority of governments in the world.

Among the central theses of the proponents of neo-liberalism are the sanctity of the market economy, property rights and a minimalist state. In reality this means granting the greatest freedom to private corporations to do as they wish. It signifies the inviolability of the power they dispose of as a result of the assets they hold. It is a call for the radical reduction of the capacity of the state to intervene for the benefit of the billions of human beings in individual countries and the world, who cannot, on their own, interact with capital on an equal footing.

Add to this the fact that these propositions have become part of the stock-in-trade of the prescriptions given to the poor of the world about what is meant by, and what they should do to fulfil the requirements of good governance. This is drummed into our heads by all an sundry, including the Bretton Woods institutions, individual governments, the mass media, civil society organisations, and so on. The poor and the powerless have no choice but to do as they are told.

In reality what all this means is that both the objective processes impacting on the evolution of human society and the dominant ideas in our contemporary world are not working in favour of the objective we share, for globalisation governed by the people.

Rather, they point to a process of globalisation that governs the people, in which those who have power, who are the minority, should be given the greatest leeway to exercise that power, in their interest.

The real world in which we live is characterised by a gross imbalance in the distribution of power. This power in all its forms is concentrated in a few countries. These countries own the bulk of the wealth of nations. The dominant ideas within these countries define the global agenda.

The all-round power and strength these countries dispose of gives them the possibility to ensure that social practice within all countries conforms to such prescriptions as they may advance. The events around the issue of Iraq have exposed the depth and seriousness of the challenge the multilateral system faces as to how to respond to the distribution of power in today's world.

It is therefore not possible to discuss a new multilateralism without discussing the issue of the global distribution of power. I presume that when we speak of this new multilateralism, we do not intend merely to put forward a utopian ideal that we will seek to dignify by describing as the policy of the global democratic left.

I must presume that we speak of a perspective that seeks to respond practically to the contemporary imbalance in the global distribution of power, so that we do indeed advance towards the situation in which globalisation is governed by the people.

In this regard, it is clear that we would be living in a fool's paradise if we proceeded on the basis that we have any possibility to disempower the powerful so that, to create a level playing field, we bring them to the level of those who dispose of less power. Obviously, the most logical way to address the power imbalance is to bring up those with less power to a position where they can interact with the powerful on a more equal basis.

Though there may be no unanimity on this matter, nevertheless a global consensus exists in favour of the democratisation of the existing multilateral institutions. It would therefore seem obvious that for us to make progress towards a new multilateralism, we must use whatever collective strength we have as the Socialist International to bring about the necessary changes in such important institutions as the UN, the Bretton Woods organisations, and the WTO.

These changes have to be about the democratisation of all of these. This should result in ensuring a fair and equitable exercise of power within the system of global governance, enabling the voice of the people, and especially the poor, to be heard. This would be an important step towards the realisation of the goal of ensuring that globalisation should be governed by the people.

Given that this has not yet been achieved, despite the protracted effort that has been put into this matter, we doubt the wisdom of proposing the establishment of new multilateral institutions, such as the proposed Security Council for Sustainable Development.

The UN Secretary General is in the process of establishing a Panel of Eminent Persons, which will make proposals about reforming the multilateral system. This provides the Socialist International with an opportunity to make its own comprehensive proposals with regard to this matter.

It would therefore seem to us that the most sensible approach to the issue of a new multilateralism would be for the SI to set up its own Commission to make proposals on a comprehensive rather than an ad-hoc basis, informed by its own ideological and political perspectives about what our common world should look like in future.

Together, the Rio Earth Summit and the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development have provided the international community with the necessary Programmes of Action to address the challenge of sustainable development in all its elements, the social, economic and environmental. Whatever other ideas we may have on these matters as the Socialist International, surely one of the most sensible things to do is to use whatever strength we have to ensure the implementation of these Programmes of Action.

It is also true that the issue of Iraq has, as we have said, raised critically important questions about the issue of international peace and security. The genocidal massacre of the people of Rwanda in 1994, when a million people were murdered in one hundred days, with the UN doing nothing to stop the slaughter had already raised serious concerns.

The seemingly unending suffering of both Palestinians and Israelis, despite the adoption of the Road Map, also points to the urgency of resolving the challenges we all face with regard to the matter of international peace and security. Of course, this has also been highlighted by the reality and threat of international terrorism, which demands a united global response.

All this makes it imperative that the United Nations should discuss the issue of what the UN and all its member states should do to honour the obligations contained in the UN Charter. This matter cannot be put on hold, while we await the proposals that will be tabled by the Panel of Eminent Persons being constituted by the UN Secretary General.

Once again, this presents us with the challenge to say specifically what proposals does the SI have that would guide all its member parties as they seek to influence the outcome of the important discussion about current challenges in the area of international peace and security. Hopefully this Congress will provide us with some guidance on this matter.

Historically, the socialist movement is the political representative of the working class and the working people, the very masses that we say should govern the process of globalisation. The outcomes we seek, of a new multilateralism that would guarantee sustainable development and security, cannot be achieved without the involvement of these masses.

It would therefore seem obvious that as members of the Socialist International we have an obligation to organise these masses into action -the working people, the youth, the women, the religious communities, the professionals, artists and others, the masses both in the North and the South, to engage in action for the birth of a new multilateralism informed by the perspective of a globalisation governed by the people.

In this regard, we have to answer the question honestly - why have we abandoned the streets to other forces, which might resort to methods we do not accept, but which nevertheless are raising important and legitimate questions about the real meaning of globalisation in terms of the lives of the billions of ordinary people in the world.

We trust that this XXII Congress of the Socialist International will help us to answer all the questions we have posed practically, so that its views gain the pre-eminence in the setting of the global agenda they deserve, defeating the sustained effort of the neo-liberals and conservatives to sustain a perspective that offers no hope to the poor, the hungry and the powerless of the world.

Thank you.