



ILO Tripartite Technical Workshop on the Impact of the
Food Price Crisis on Decent Work- Geneva, March 5-6,
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The IUF is delighted to have this opportunity to present our views to this interagency meeting on the food crisis. We would also like to put on record our thanks to the ILO for convening the meeting and to the other UN agencies for attending. The presentations and discussions we had this morning have certainly given us important information and new ideas for future work. We welcome the statement from Dr David Nabarro, coordinator of the UN High Level Task Force (UN HLTF) on the global food security crisis, that they must look again at the Comprehensive Framework for Action (CFA) through ILO eyes, in particular the role of International Labour Standards and Rights.

Last year, on the occasion of the ILC high level panel on the food crisis the IUF was also invited to speak. That text is available here and there is no need to repeat the analysis, but we do say that the analysis has been confirmed by subsequent developments.

Last year, agricultural workers and the rural and urban poor were told - falsely - that shortages were behind a doubling and tripling of their bill for basic foodstuffs. Growing prosperity and increasing appetites in India and China were allegedly driving the increase in global hunger. Food prices since then have fallen but still remain unaffordably high. Now we are being told that record harvests in 2008 mean new potential price increases as growers cut back on acreage. So again we see that whether farmgate prices rise or fall, agricultural workers - those who help feed the world - remain on the edge of hunger.

Few predicted last March that we would be entering the most serious systemic economic crisis since the depression of the 1930's. That depression, saw agricultural and commodity prices decline continuously, forcing millions into abysmal poverty and driving them off the land. Agriculture, and its capacity for simultaneously generating abundant harvests and miserable poverty, remains at the center of economic and social failure.

The commodity bubble burst last year, triggering a massive flight from speculative futures markets. The bursting of the bubble has also driven down the price of oil, whose accelerated rise was one of the motive forces driving the biofuel boom. The heavily subsidized government push for biofuels, which drove up food prices by consuming vast amounts of grain and depleting food stocks while providing windfall profits for traders and primary processors, has slowed, but competition between food and fuel continues to weigh on global food security. This is why the IUF last year joined the call for a moratorium on biofuel expansion pending a full assessment of the social, environmental and employment impacts.

Governments and private investors have launched a race to buy up prime farmland for export production, further jeopardizing food security. The world's poorest countries have entered into competition for selling or leasing huge tracts of land to produce food their citizens will never see.

There is no room for complacency - if speculation and biofuels converged to provoke hyperinflation, we cannot sit back, watch the money flow out, and conclude that the problem has taken care of itself through market corrections. Food and foodworkers have been subsumed into volatile global capital markets, These markets urgently require strong regulation to head off the next catastrophe. It is time to cut the umbilical cord linking oil and agriculture, so that we can move to more sustainable methods of production, halt climate change and rescue vanishing topsoil and water resources. These are also the daily concerns of agricultural workers.

So since last June, have we advanced? When IUF general secretary Ron Oswald spoke at the ILC high level panel on the food crisis, he emphasized the total absence of real social and economic actors in the FAO's policy brief for the World Food Summit. There were markets, but no corporations, capital, but no investors, governments and food stocks but no WTO and no IMF.

Now we have the High Level Task Force and the CFA, and as we have heard today, there are some significant absences. There are stakeholders, the hungry, the vulnerable, but no agricultural workers, though the ILO estimates that the waged work force in agriculture is made up of 700 million women and men producing the food we eat but who are often unable to afford it. Their number is even larger if we consider that many small rural producers are in fact dependent on a seasonal or temporary wage for basic survival. Workers transformed into "outgrowers" are generally entirely dependent on their former employers for inputs, sales and credit.

Dr Nabarro talked about the gaps and contradictions in the CFA; I want to elaborate on a few of these: In the CFA there is discussion of social protection networks, but no mention of the systematic violation of the basic right of agricultural workers to protect themselves and their families through exercising their collective right to organize into trade unions and to bargain collectively with employers. There is no mention of the formal exclusion of agricultural workers from systems of industrial relations and social security, including in some of the richest countries in the world. The government of Ontario, in Canada, recently called on the country's Supreme Court to uphold the exclusion of farmworkers from the state's industrial relations legislation by refusing to categorize them as "employees" for collective bargaining purposes. Since the right of every worker to join a trade union is, like all human rights, inherent in their humanity, the court is effectively being asked to rule whether farmworkers are in fact human beings, or part-time, precarious humans who abandon their humanity when they are working to produce food.

The CFA focuses on poverty and hunger, but only a single reference to wages - a reference which warns against the potentially destabilizing impact of wage increases! The IUF believes that agricultural workers need a living wage, and

that a living wage for agricultural workers is a key element in the fight for food security.

Since food riots last year put hunger back on the political agenda, there has been a good deal of research, much of it excellent. However we have yet to see an approach to hunger based on recognition of the simple fact that one of the major keys to eradicating malnutrition is decent work in agriculture for those who work for a wage. The bulk of hunger is in rural areas, and agricultural workers are among the most food insecure. They are hungry because they are poor, and they are poor because their basic rights, including their collective rights as workers, are violated on a daily basis.

These workers are not passive, vulnerable victims. Given the space to exercise the rights they are denied, they have the capacity to fundamentally move the food system in the direction of the social and environmental sustainability which is fundamental to their own existence - and that of all the rest of us. Agriculture today kills, maims, poisons and pollutes the bodies and the living and the environment of those who produce our food. Advancing the fight against hunger means advancing decent work in agriculture.

At the Madrid summit, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon called for a "third track" in the response to global hunger, "The right to food, as a basis for analysis, action and accountability." This is to be welcomed, but he was only reaffirming something which is already anchored in international law and the Charter of the United Nations. The human rights obligations of governments override all other treaty obligations. Governments have an obligation to protect, to defend, and to advance the right to food. Food rights include the right to food and rights for those who produce food. This is why achieving decent work in agriculture is fundamental to advancing the fight against hunger. The ILO, as the sole UN agency with a mandate for the world of work, must be actively involved in the fight for food rights if we are not to fail again.

There are now four main UN organizations concerned with food. The global partnership may add an additional layer. Their contribution to reducing hunger and malnutrition will only be effective to the extent that it is firmly anchored within a human rights framework - and it should be recalled after the Geneva Conventions on the rights of prisoners the Conventions of the ILO are the oldest component of normative human rights law.

When we speak about developing a consensus on biofuels, that consensus must be built on the primacy of human needs and human rights, including the right to food and rights for food workers.

When we speak about regulating commodity markets, that regulation must have as its goal advancing food rights.

When we speak about investment in agriculture, we have to ask: what kind of investment and investment for whom? When we speak about linking food producers to national and international markets, we must ask: What precisely are the links, do they raise living standards, enhance access to affordable and nutritious food, promote sustainability, and advance the rights of workers?

When we speak about a rapid completion of the WTO Doha agenda, is it "consensus" that this will advance the right to food, and rights for food workers? If that is currently the case than we challenge this consensus.

The IUF has long advocated the creation of an Economic and Social Security Council in the United Nations to enforce the primacy of rights. Given the scale of the challenges we face - global hunger, global depression, global environmental destruction, and global violations of basic rights - this idea is now more topical than ever.

Mr. Salazar talked this morning about employment being the most effective way out of poverty. I entirely agree but think we have to take the discussion one step further. There are clear ILO and other statistics on the low wages in agriculture – as low as 1 USD per day. Poverty wages not only for day labourers, but for plantation workers. The way out of this is collective bargaining. Too many agricultural workers are excluded from collective bargaining, so strengthening trade union capacity to bargain and achieve living wages has to be acknowledged in the CFA as a key tool to achieve food security for waged agricultural workers. This was underlined by the remarks here of Professor Olivier de Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. Lack of purchasing power, he told us, not a physical shortage of food, is the source of hunger in the world today.

IUF's expertise is not smallholder agriculture, but we recognise the importance of strengthening smallholder agriculture. However, this is only part of the solution. For agricultural workers the solution to their food insecurity is increased purchasing power. This can be achieved by a variety of tools, including social protection schemes ,but for us the key is collective bargaining. Our key contribution and the thing we most want to see taken up by the CFA is the application of ILO standards on freedom of association and collective bargaining.

In conclusion, and in the more limited context of this discussion and the role of the UN agencies, the Workers Group strongly urges that:

- ensuring food rights be put at the heart of interagency policy, and that these policies be continuously monitored to ensure that they are advancing the right to food;
- interagency action on the food crisis address the food security and employment needs of rural workers while also recognizing their central role in ensuring global food needs and a sustainable food system;
- the Governing Body of the ILO request the Director General to formalize interaction between the ILO and the UNHLTF. The ILO contribution should be specifically based on its particular expertise including HIV/AIDS in the workplace and the elimination of child labour in agriculture;
- the strategic role of women in producing, preparing, processing, marketing and trading of food must be built into policy responses and implementation;

- there be interagency co-operation to gather and review comprehensive statistical data on the rural workforce, rural labour markets and rural enterprises to assist in shaping national and international policies for food security. In line with its mandate, the ILO should carry out a study on the impact of the food crisis on employment, livelihoods and fundamental principles and rights at work;
- the HLTF and UN agencies working on global food security are encouraged to make use of the networks of employers and workers organisations at international and national level in policy development and in ensuring delivery of policy outcomes. They are encouraged to involve employers and workers organisations in the development and delivery of national plans
- and finally that the ILO should contribute to the work of the Global Partnership on Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition particularly in the areas of employment, fundamental principles and rights at work, social protection and the elimination of child labour in agriculture

We recommend that the Plan of Action developed by last year's ILC committee of rural employment for poverty reduction be used to shape ILO contribution to the CFA. We believe that the room note reflects our discussions here and we support its contents being conveyed to the ILO Governing Body and the Director General. Thank you.