

Dinner Address to the International Nuclear Congress and Exhibition - 1993

By Shirley G. E. Carr

To be a dinner speaker after such a delightful meal, and during an intensive week for the delegates is indeed a challenge. Anything I can add to your subject matter would perhaps be incidental, so I shall not try to be a "know-it-all" in this industry which is so vast and complicated. What I do intend to touch on is the collective responsibility we all have, labour, business, governments, teachers, scientists, institutions and the general public at large.

Canadians know how important this industry is, how delicate a subject matter it is, and how divergent public opinion has been. But we also know that with all of these factors, we have taken our responsibilities more than seriously. We are a protective nation in a sense. Not only in dealing with wars and disasters, whether accidental or deliberate, but also those who work and are responsible for the safe use of the materials you have to work with, and of course live with.

Just as equality and equal opportunity for all, regardless of race, creed, or colour of skin, or the opening of the secrets of outer space and the universe as a whole, we have not only an obligation but a duty to make sure these events are accomplished without a holocaust to the whole world.

What a horrendous duty and obligation - what a challenge we have - what a legacy can we leave to our present and future generations? Can we do it? Can we use what we have and know? Can we go into the future without wars and destruction to life, nature, health, the environment, the hemisphere? Can we set aside our political and economic ideals to deal with this question openly, setting aside any hidden agendas?

Well, I am an eternal optimist. I happen to think we can, and not only can, but must. If we do not, what will be left? You tell me. The documentation prepared for your congress and the interventions made by your distinguished delegates and guests, I am sure, very eloquently pointed out the fact that we are at a crossroads, notwithstanding the tremendous challenges that lie ahead. But I join with you in a sense of profound optimism about the future.

The issues you have discussed are very real, and could determine the path of peace and freedom for a long, long time. But as you approach this monumental task in your professions or chosen field, I think it is important to consider the international context that confronts the workers today, whether they are in Poland, South Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans, Europe, Russia, or Canada. The sweeping political, economic and social changes occurring today in the closing decade of the 20th Century constitute an unprecedented challenge to many societies.

On one hand, one notices attempts to qualitatively new levels of competitiveness in increasing global markets by rapid technological progress, even while the social costs of the economic crisis are becoming more obvious. On the other hand, the return to democracy in countries previously characterized by authoritarian regimes had led to an explicit acknowledgement of the fact that economic change however imperative cannot be achieved without due recognition of its social dimensions. Such recognition ensures that the welfare of the most vulnerable groups is not lost sight of, and thus safeguards political stability.

Since the ongoing economic changes demand great effort and considerable sacrifice, their successful application in the politically stable democratic context necessitates the working out of compromises and the establishment of new social contracts among the parties concerned. It also requires a consensus on, and deep commitment to, economic and social development as a final goal on the part of all concerned. Such a commitment is vital if the motivation and discipline which must underpin an equitable division of present costs and future benefits is to be maintained.

In this industry, consensus requires dialogue, and the encouragement of such dialogue in which "the representatives of the workers and employers, enjoying equal status with those of governments (and) join them in free discussion and democratic decision, with a view of the promotion of the common welfare". This is a key element in the mandate of the International Labour Organization.

Conditions are not always ripe for such participation of the social partners. Stable industrial relations systems must be based on solid and representative parties. One might ask, can the union movement evolve within a difficult institutional framework which imposes too many constraints or obligations to organize itself in contradiction to the general economic structures.

Over the past few years, there has been an incredible resurgence of the universal and popular demand for an end to authoritarian systems. In the wake of this energy, some dictators have disappeared, and the world has become less tolerant of those that remain. The Cold War has ended, as have many barriers to human contact and interaction, thus releasing new energies and aspirations. The political economy of the world is increasingly dominated by giant transnational corporations which were enormously strengthened by the years of Thatcherism and Reaganomics.

You all know that the highly concentrated and mobile capital is driving a rapid and dynamic technological revolution. With banking moving rapidly by push button computer delight, money moves before you can blink. These forces roam the world with little regard for either national boundaries or social values. Tens of millions of workers in industrialized countries sit idle, with little prospect of meaningful work in the near future. If they did have a job, where is the occupational health and safety commitment? In the developing world, more than one billion people live in misery and abject poverty,

and I ask, where are the safeguards for them? Look around you; what do you see in your country? In the face of these powers, people increasingly feel a sense of frustration, cynicism and even despair about the political institutions they have created to serve them.

And so, ladies and gentlemen, the question of how to translate political freedom into genuine human freedom requires an urgent response, not only from all of us in this room or in our chosen field but from the whole planet. I am convinced that part of the answer lies in the regeneration and the pulling together of forces that are necessary to ensure that human beings have a voice and a sense of participation in the political, economic and social lives of their country and the world. There are undoubtedly any number of ways for a labour movement to approach the domestic and global challenges that face us in this regard, and I certainly have no magic formula to offer. But I do know that whatever approach is taken it will involve some kind of interaction between trade unions and economic and political power elites.

I happen to believe that this congress proves that. It proves that in some circumstances the approach of constructive engagement or co-operative co-determination in these circumstances may be appropriate. In other words, particularly in this industry we find ourselves with little choice but to demand our presence and participation. After all, this is our universe to protect too, just as it is for you or anyone else.

However, a more basic and important question involves what constitutes the bottom line for workers as we try to influence events in our own country and around the world. In my view, the issues that cut across all lines for workers concern the universality of fundamental human and trade union rights, the pursuit of full employment as an economic goal, and the building and protecting of strong societies and unions that have the capacity to improve the lives of their people. Ever since working people, many of whom have been brutally treated, imprisoned or tortured, have been drawn together in large numbers in employment, we have been engaged in a battle for social justice, human rights and equality, and a free society.

That is why we have for many years been directly involved locally, nationally and internationally in dealing with this particularly difficult industry. I am proud of the women and men around the world who have taken upon themselves to be very deeply involved in the whole question of nuclear energy, particularly here in Canada, both nationally and internally.

Our labour movement in Canada has a standing committee to deal with this question, and at our 17th Constitutional Convention of the Canadian Labour Congress, 1992 we adopted one of the most comprehensive policy statements and reports I have seen anywhere. I shall not go into this report in detail, but if you wish a copy I am sure it could be made available. This report had 12 sections and

four recommendations. Hopefully it will be well read and could be used as a model for those who are attempting to deal with this complicated subject. We also play a major role in the international trade union movement, both in tripartite forums and with our international trade union secretariats.

I am also pleased to make you aware of the Nuclear Workers Council that has been established in Canada by the unions here. There are 19 unions involved in this council. They meet three or four times per year, and of course you can imagine what they can and have accomplished, not only for themselves but for their enterprise and their communities. They are a proud group, and they say, "The most important thing for us as employees of the nuclear industry is to be proud of what we do. We are on the leading edge of technology and are second to none in the world." I agree with them.

Recently I was privileged to meet and to hear Prime Minister Gro Brundtland when she addressed an international free trade convention in Latin America. She said, "Everything we do will be futile if we do not succeed in financing sustainable development. We must seek new ways to ensure better access to environmentally sound technology. Governments have to create incentives and a framework to facilitate technology transfer and co-operation. Industrialized countries must assist developing countries in improving their ability to assess, choose and utilize new technologies." I happen to agree with her very much.

She also reminded us that developing countries must also help themselves to gain access to technology. Many developing countries have imposed bureaucratic restraints on technology acquisition such as import duties and prohibitive regulations. Access to unpatented technology can be achieved if developing countries themselves allow their experts more of a free hand in their exchanges with the outside world.

It is my opinion that, together with capital and technology, trade is a key driving force of the world economy. In GATT for instance, there should be discussions on how to deal with the complex relationships between trade and the environment. There are still conflicting views on how this relationship should be dealt with. Imagine that in the year 1993 there still seems to be a few who feel that environment concerns will be used as a new screen for protectionism even though countries know very well that they cannot be excluded from environmental evaluation.

How does one compete in the global economy when you know that you may face a dilemma where products manufactured in countries where environmental standards are low compete with products from countries and companies which have made large investments in safe and sound modern production equipment? Those who work in state-of-the-art production plants will be unlikely to understand why competing products are allowed to endanger their jobs when the competitor does not have to take environmental considerations into account.

I must say that many international companies today do operate by the same high environmental standards regardless of country of operation. However, there are a number of free riders, and their activities actually threaten free trade as a global economic system. In fact, they often locate in countries that would suffer immensely if the system of free trade is not upheld.

I believe Prime Minister Brundtland when she stated that we need a shared global vision on this subject, so that we can gather our fragmented efforts into a focused effort to save our common future. Our aim must be nothing less than the overall direction of the world economy.

I also happen to believe that the system is too slow. When at the global level they have not even come near to what they could, and far too often international negotiations proceed at the pace dictated by the slowest wheels on the wagon, the least common denominator. It is difficult to see how decision-making in international institutions can become effective unless we introduced new elements of supranational rule. Countries have sovereignty over their national resources, but decisions on emissions as well as the use of toxic and hazardous substances which affect us all will be illusory if we can only move forward at a snail's pace decided by the most reluctant movers.

At the intergovernmental level, we have a great institutional capacity at our service in all of our countries. We need to realize that all human activities are relevant for sustainable development. Environment and development issues are not merely additions to existing or ongoing affairs. They should not be dealt with by "some sub-committee somewhere" by the top operationally-responsible people in every country and organization.

I know the United Nations has been busy these days internationally on this particular subject. But the United Nations is in my opinion the agency that must focus more strongly on the environment and take it seriously, and develop issues and place it front and centre on its agenda, since access to and use of scarce resources may become a more dangerous source of international tensions. Peace, environment and development must, together with human rights be our agenda towards the year 2000 and beyond. The overall responsibility for co-operation of all activities of the U.N. system should perhaps be in the hands of the Secretary-General in the truest sense for unified global action.

Mass media brings into our homes today the images of a new global reality. It provides almost instant coverage, 24 hours a day. But these are fragmented images, offering only part of the new reality surrounding us. When we see the ravages of earthquakes, wars, nuclear bombs, forest fires, these are the bewildering array of options for escape from the ugly aspect and visions of reality from the environment of our planet. When images of dying children in Africa and elsewhere in the world flicker across our TV screens, when we see the massive destruction of primeval rain forests, we have the possibility of escape by switching the channel. What we need is a global organization to counteract

this fragmentation. We need caretakers of solidarity and social responsibility. Ultra-liberalism and irresponsible economic operations designed to optimize short term profits would be easier to pursue if the free trade unions of the world were weak and fragmented, but this is not the case.

We in the trade union movement are concerned with democracy; we are concerned about the environment. We are concerned about development. That is why we are here. That is why we insist that governments and bureaucracy treat us with respect and allow us to use our knowledge and resources to work together. What we need is peace in this highly explosive and difficult field.

We have an enormous job to do. The process of change is in itself a dynamic restructuring process which requires economic activity at a high level. There will be a need to replace capital stock at a high rate to promote energy efficient technology. Investments in infrastructure will be required to meet an entirely new model of future activities. Consequently, the private sector, trade unions and governments should recognize the great opportunities for investments and for employment created by the need for change.

The future generations are already knocking at our door. The living conditions of our children and grandchildren are being determined now. Since they cannot take care of their own destiny, we must do it on their behalf. Are you prepared to do this?

Again, to quote Prime Minister Brundtland, "The day must come when people look back on our generation and say, "Faced with the challenge, they managed to upgrade human civilization"."

