

The crisis must be paid for by those who caused it – the plutocratic¹ elite

By Yannis Pasoulas
UITBB Secretariat Member



The economic crisis was neither created by parthenogenesis², nor was it the result of “bad management by

certain greedy capitalists”, as big business and EU and other countries' governments would have the workers believe.

Their aim is to disguise the nature of the crisis and not to go into its causes. In fact, they want to convince the working class that it is in its own interests to pay for the damage yet again so that the system can overcome the crisis.

Consequently they do all they can to make the workers bear the burden of the crisis and introduce one antisocial measure after another: wage cuts, lower pensions, grim reductions in social security, the abolishment of collective agreements and the proliferation of flexible working.

They want the capitalist system to come out of the crisis unscathed, both politically and ideologically. Their main aim in any crisis, small or large, is to do everything possible to cover up the nature of the system so that the working class makes no claim on their power.

The crisis demonstrates the anarchy of the capitalist production system and arises from the over-accumulation of capital gained from the exploitation of the working class and the capitalists' inability to reinvest that capital, preferring to increase their profit margins.

Therefore the fundamental cause of the crisis is to be found in the model of capitalist development centred on the interests of a plutocratic elite, regardless of the poverty and genuine needs of the masses.

The workers must refuse to pay a single euro or dollar for this crisis. On the contrary, they must wage struggles to reduce the consequences of the crisis to a

minimum while at the same time fighting the power and any recovery of the the pre-existing order.

At their summer meeting European Union leaders, despite internal disagreements caused by their differing interests, all – liberals, conservatives and



Michalis Papanikolaou and the workers

pseudo socialists – were in agreement on the strategy to be pursued: to deal with the crisis and step up attacks on workers' rights and social security, gains won by the workers through struggles waged since the 19th century.

It is obvious that in a time of economic crisis the struggle between the working class and capitalist forces and their political spokespersons is bound to be intense. It is especially important in this battle to impose defeats on the bourgeoisie, both politically and ideologically. Every victory is an important step for the workers' movement and its future struggles and will help create the conditions for radical change in the economy and the basis of power. What the bourgeoisie sees as a threat to its political and economic supremacy is a source of hope for the workers' and grass roots movement.

¹ *Plutocracy: System of government where wealth is the principal basis of power*

² *Parthenogenesis: Reproduction without fertilization*



Brazil

On 3 December 2008 six trade union centres organised a march on Brasilia to tell the government that it was not up to the workers to pay for the crisis. In the Junco district, workers called a 7-day strike in order to open negotiations and in the Vassouras district there was also a strike against employer intransigence.

Peru

Despite determined resistance from the government the FTCCP of construction workers is again demanding collective bargaining.

France

All the trade union centres agreed on a programme of demands centred mainly on wages and jobs. In order to force employers and the government into talks, a powerful united series of strikes was organised on 29 January, 19 March and 1 May. The centres intend to organise further actions before the summer holidays.

Ireland

100,000 people demonstrated on 21 February 2009 against the government's austerity plan.

Guadeloupe – Martinique – Réunion

After several weeks of strikes the workers and people of these Caribbean and Indian Ocean islands won wage rises of up to 200 euros per month from the French government and employers.

Italy

On 13 February there was a mass strike in response to a call from the CGIL trade union centre in protest against the 22 January 2009 agreement which will lead to wage cuts and lower purchasing power.



With the WFTU on 1st April

The WFTU's call to observe 1 April as an international day of action for workers' rights and against exploitation was a great success all over the world. There were demonstrations, work stoppages and strikes in over 45 countries, centred on demands and aims proposed by the WFTU. This day was the proof that the WFTU has entered a new era since the renewal set in motion at its 15th Congress in Havana.

A May Day of Unity and Attack

Severely affected by the world-wide capitalist economic crisis, all workers, both men and women, have been voicing loud and clear their refusal to accept redundancies and factory closures and condemning government policies, especially those of the G20 aimed at bailing out the banks and multinationals by giving them astronomical public aid with no strings attached on the pretext of keeping and creating jobs. International solidarity and the determination to step up struggles have marked the workers' marches and other demonstrations on all continents. For example, in Portugal hundreds of thousands of workers in 60 of the country's towns responded to the CGTP-IN's call to march; in France May Day brought an exceptional response to the unions' calls and resulted in 1,200,000 demonstrators taking part in 283 unity-fuelled initiatives, and so on.

UITBB May Day Statement

According to the International Labour Office, at least 5 million construction workers lost their jobs during 2008. The UITBB called upon fellow workers to unite with courage and optimism and take part in May Day demonstrations, transforming them into a climax of trade union action and a strong expression of international workers' solidarity.

Resolution (excerpts)

"We must put an end to the period of neo-liberal economic and political hegemony through the development of bold new policies that are in tune with the needs of the working class today. The participants urge that the UITBB look to organising an 8th Seminar in 2010."

Japan

Tadao Tomioka
Kenkourou, said:

The expansion of economic relations among Asian nations based on free trade treaties and economic partnership agreements has become a major problem for the acceptance of foreign workers.

The national confederation Zenroren has set up a national assistance centre for migrant workers aimed at protecting migrants' rights on the basis of current labour law in Japan. Following an appeal issued by the UITBB, Kenkouru (affiliated to Zenroren) launched a campaign for the protection of migrant workers, which is beginning to bear fruit.

With regard to the national struggle for compensation for people suffering from silicosis, we have laid complaints against 75 major construction companies on behalf of 1,500 victims. Concerning asbestosis, 33 workers have laid complaints against the Kagawa factory belonging to the company Etanitto which manufactures water pipes from material containing asbestos. Our aim is to put an end to industrial accidents and occupational diseases.

Canada

Bill Signal
Consultant at the Ontario Plumbers' Association, told us:

Canada has a population of 33.4 million, 17.1 million of whom are



employed. In 2008 the unemployment rate was comparatively low, construction representing 6% of the country's economy. In 2008 Canada resisted the crisis better than most of the G8 countries: no bank crashed, they even made some profit, and the unemployment rate remained stable, as did consumer confidence.

Between 1997-2008 government budgets were relatively well-balanced, no de-regularisation measures were taken, prices remained steady and there was a surge in construction. On that basis the government denied there was a recession and made no plans for an economic relaunch, which led to a major crisis and the dissolution of parliament, obliging the government to recognise the recession and present a rescue plan. By January 2009 Canada had lost 129,000 full-time jobs and 234,000 part-time jobs and in February the unemployment rate rose to 8%. Canada now has 1,310,000 unemployed.

Trade union action around transnational companies

John Sutton
UITBB President, suggested:

- Securing union rights via collective agreements – site, regional or national
- Building broadest possible coalition for campaigns with other unions, politicians, civic and community groups. Information, knowledge and united action are all critical
- Forwarding informal or formal complaints to ILO



- Engaging bi-laterally with other trade unions who have organised TNCs' operations
- Engaging in co-ordinated international action – protests in capital cities (generate worldwide publicity), strike action on broad front, boycotts, pickets, etc.

Indonesian Arquipelago: On your behalf we spoke to Bismo Sanyoto, leader of the FKUI (construction workers' union)

Q. Could you tell the readers of the UITBB Bulletin about your country?

A. Indonesia consists of more than 17,000 islands with more than 200 ethnic groups and many different languages. The population is 230 million, which makes it the 4th most populous country in the world. Half the population live on less than 2 dollars a day, two thirds of the employed are in the informal economy and underemployment affects 30% of the population. While the number of documented migrant workers is 4 million, it is estimated that the figure for undocumented migrant workers is four times higher.

Q. What are the main social problems you are up against?

A. Together with jobs and wages, social insurance is a great problem. The state has a monopoly in that field, so most of the contributions go to the government which pays little back to the workers. Asbestos is also a major concern both now and for the future. 8 million households and 5.5 million construction workers still come into contact with asbestos at the risk of their lives, and asbestos is still being used for building hospitals, schools and other establishments. The government development plan is a way of ensuring faster economic growth and speeding up labour market flexibility.

Q. What does your federation represent and what are its aims?

A. We organise workers in the informal sector of the construction industry. Our federation, the FKUI, was established on 21 September 1997 and today we have over 65,000 members in 462 unions at plant or site level. We act through struggle to promote the welfare of workers and their families, and our federation is independent from the government, employers' associations and political parties. We believe that workers united cannot be defeated.

On the initiative of the trade union centre of the Canary Islands and the UITBB, a meeting of European building and wood workers' unions was held in Tenerife on 4-5 May.

Against the background of a particularly serious economic crisis, especially for construction and other workers in our industries, its aim was to highlight the stakes and to help increase the level of mobilisation.

The stakes

By Yannis Pasoulas
UITBB Secretariat Member

Globalisation is very unfair; it has increased the suffering of the working class and accentuated poverty and destitution. The present crisis is one of overproduction and over-accumulation. In this negative environment for the working class the role of the unions becomes ever more important. Our aim is to enrich trade union action and to put the working class first, not only in Europe but worldwide.



The discussion

Several brothers stressed the ill effects of consensus-based trade unionism and the practice of social dumping. The state of mobilisations and the expansion of struggles, together with their prospects, was also examined.

The participants also considered ways out of the crisis and the nature of trade union independence, and it was proposed that this should be taken to mean from political parties rather than with regard to political concepts. The idea of public service for social housing was also raised, as was the worrying number of children living below the poverty line in Europe.

Secretariat Actions

- Publish the introductory reports by Yannis Pasoulas and José Dinis.
- Produce a poster.
- Plan a UITBB delegation to meet political groups in the new European parliament and present our demands.
- Launch a campaign to contact and provide information to construction unions in Europe.

Resolution on Immigration

The participants at the UITBB European meeting, held in Tenerife on 4-5 May, denounce the fact.

- a) that on the pretext of the economic crisis, individual European governments and the European Union itself are daily hardening immigrant policies, blaming migrants for the current deterioration in the labour market, and passing laws and directives that make all migrants extremely vulnerable and encourage excessive feelings of xenophobia and racism in the native population;
- b) that such policies respond to the interests of big business which see immigrants exclusively as an expendable labour force and not as citizens;
- c) that in the context of Spain, as in that of other European countries, the law on foreigners importing European directives into national legislation mirrors this philosophy of defending the interests of big business and company bosses;
- d) that in the Canary Islands these policies are the reason for the death of innumerable African men and women workers forced to emigrate by the hunger and poverty caused by colonialism, neo-colonialism, imperialism and neo-liberal policies.

Because of all this, workers' organisations will rely on and encourage all mobilisations that aim for equality among all workers, men and women, whether native or foreign, ensuring that the latter benefit from all the laws applicable in the host country under the same conditions as local workers; they are for the closure of internment centres on the soil of all European countries and against the policies that repress this group of people. They demand the implementation of citizenship rights for all.

We interviewed Juan Melón, general secretary of the Building and Wood Workers' Union of the CIG of Galicia

Q. *What is the situation in the construction industry in Galicia and Spain as a whole?*

A. The crisis made itself felt later in Galicia than in the rest of Spain, in the same way that the industry developed later. The crisis is also less generalised, though since summer 2008 the consequences have been very serious and unemployment has risen by 50%. On the south coast of Spain and in the Madrid region we can talk of a total paralysis of the private sector, to which both left- and right-wing governments had abandoned house building. For years

speculative building has well outstripped demand with Spain building as much as Italy, France and England combined.

Q. *Did this speculative building allow for social housing needs to be met?*

A. Workers often do not have much purchasing power and so do not have access to housing that has not been built with them in mind, but is rather aimed at tourism and speculation. Social housing cooperatives have been sacrificed to the benefit of the private sector and many households have had to take on debts for 25 to 30 years in order to put a roof over their heads. At the moment, the government housing plan is administered by town councils and mainly concerns a market in the renovation of existing properties. A condition is imposed on companies bidding for building work –

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Seminar participants

Decent work – Social protection – Safety at work – Current situation and prospects for Africa in a crisis-ridden world

9 building and wood workers' unions from 7 African countries – Benin, Cameroon, Mali, Mauritius, Niger, Senegal and Togo – discussed these subjects over 4 days. Below we reproduce some excerpts from those discussions.

Senegal: Day labourers are not covered for travel accidents even if they work for the same company for several months. Social security only covers workers in the formal sector. Children born outside marriage are not taken into account, even though their fathers recognise them officially.

Mauritius: At present construction is flourishing, but paradoxically jobs are being lost while immigration is expanding and there are more day labourers.

Benin: Unlike other African countries, medical treatment, notably Caesarian sections and the care of children, is not free in Benin. A major problem is non-respect for ILO norms.

Togo: Workers in the construction industry are among those most affected by fatal accidents at work and industrial diseases. Every year several thousand workers lose their lives on building sites.

All Participants: Casual workers are not declared and foreign transnationals, especially the Chinese, do not respect minimum national regulations. The authorities do not take the necessary steps to enforce national legislation.

Ideas to be pursued

Cameroon: If companies do not make social security contributions, the social security office must use the powers at its disposal to force them to do so. We have health and safety committees wherever there are 50 or more workers and shop stewards wherever there are 20 or more.

Mali: In all African countries we must fight to obtain regulations that are better than ILO norms.

Niger: We must get the list of industrial diseases revised and force inspectors and the authorities to come out in favour of implementing national legislation.

Togo: Problems must be attacked at source, i.e. the causes.

All Participants: We must insist that social security legislation is unified for the whole population, complementary systems giving full social security cover is established and day labourers are declared. It is good to work with experts. We must approach state and inter-African social security bodies.

Our Interview

Numerous transnationals all over Africa are carrying out considerable infrastructural and other construction work requiring large funds and serious technology. Several problems concerning social matters and trade union rights are, however, being badly addressed or not at all. The work of the Bamako seminar has reflected this. In order to inform our readers we asked SYNIBABCOM of Mali and Hamidou Abdoulaye of SYNBARROUTES of Niger to tell us about the problems they face.



Resolutions - Recommendations

- Labour inspectorates must be given adequate funds.
- African governments must keep a strict eye on the registration of all workers (permanent, temporary, day labourers, casual workers).
- Multinationals must respect legislation and rules concerning social security and safety at work
- Health and safety committees in which union representatives take part must be set up in all companies.
- The inter-African body for avoiding industrial risks must follow up and ensure the implementation by the different African countries of the recommendations and resolutions arising from this seminar.
- **25 October 2009** must be turned into a great day of action and mobilisation for the respect of ILO international norms, especially those concerning social security and safety at work.

Resolution on Asbestos:

The participants express their support for a total ban on the extraction, production and use of asbestos and asbestos-based products. We support the position constantly defended by the UITBB on this key matter and wish to add our voice to that of those working to achieve a total ban on asbestos.

SYNIBABCOM

Foreign multinationals, including Chinese companies, have been established in Mali for a long time. They carry out major projects, such as roads and bridges and also housing. Trade unions are nearly always unwelcome in these companies because they do not want interference in their affairs. Only rarely does a Mali national belong to management. They are labourers divided into two classes – permanent employees, and casual workers who are the majority. The permanent workers are properly declared and the others are casual labourers taken on for a day, a week or a fortnight according to the company's needs. They are not declared and have no contracts, their names only appearing on an internal list next to the amount they are owed. As a result no social security contributions are paid and yet they represent 80% of the workers on site. It has to be said that national companies do not often behave any better in this respect. There is the case of a Chinese company which pays contributions for its employees, permanent and

casual, but as the latter are not declared to the social security office they cannot claim any benefits. The same applies when they retire, as they cannot get their years of work recognised under such a system. We have trouble trying to change things – the companies do not want to understand and the authorities are weak and do not take the necessary steps to ensure the law is respected. It is even more difficult to exercise trade union rights. These companies do not want any trouble. They do not want their management style to be questioned and so do not want shop stewards. It requires great perseverance and patience to get shop stewards accepted.

Abdoulaye Hamidou
General Secretary of:
SYNBARROUTES



We do not have serious problems with the long-established multinationals in Niger with regard to the respect for norms. There are certainly disputes from time to time, but we manage to overcome them through action and negotiation. The greatest problem is the 100% repayment of medical expenses, as social security only covers accidents and industrial diseases. We want to get employers to pay for complementary medical insurance. On the other hand, relations with newly-established companies are much more difficult. For example, a Chinese company is building a second bridge over the river Niger at Niamey, and not only are the workers

paid less than the set scale for Niger but they are also not declared to the social security office and so cannot claim benefits. They work a 24-hour day in shifts, even on state holidays, without any overtime supplements. There is no safety equipment either for individuals or for teams, and no paid holidays.

We were obliged to stage wildcat strikes. We told the the labour inspectorate, the minister of public works and the trade union centre USTN, and finally the foreign minister met the Chinese ambassador to inform him that the law of Niger must be implemented in all companies. At last we have been able to hold elections for shop stewards and have trained them, but all our social demands are still pending. In other words, the struggle continues!

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they must take on some unemployed in addition to regular workers. The results of this regulation will be visible after a few months. For the time being, we are trying to make sure it will be genuinely effective by not giving ground on respect for the 8-hour day and collective agreements, as this could ensure 20% more jobs.

Q. Isn't it in the interests of European workers to seek common actions to fight competition and win new rights?

A. It is important for us to be able to exchange opinions and organise actions in common, everything that encourages unity of action is useful and strengthens our ability to get our social demands met. It is a topical question in Spain at the moment, as the big unions have chosen to act through institutional negotiations. They are not planning to call workers out on a 24-hour strike to put pressure on employers. The only strike planned is being organised on 21 May by the Basque nationalist union. We would do better to lay aside our differences and concentrate on whatever can bring us together.

Coordinating Committee of the UITBB in Africa

President Moussa Kanouté, Mali

Vice-president Jean Samba Nguidjo, Cameroon

General Secretary Assane Diop, Senegal

Deputy General Secretary Abdoulaye Hamidou, Niger

Communications Officer Ega Messanh, Togo

Advisors Atinmagbo Bernard, Benin; Lall Dewnath, Mauritius; Njifon Philippe, Cameroon.

The Coordination Bureau wants the post of president to be on a yearly rotating basis.

During the Bamako seminar we had a meeting with Bomba Bagna Makawabé, president of the women's committee of the national union of public works workers (Syntagavo) of Togo and Maimouna Bamba, president of the women's committee of the building and building materials workers' union (Synibabcom) of Mali. They want women to be able to take jobs in the building industry and to be helped to expand their work possibilities.

In a friendly interview we asked them the following questions:

1. What place do women in your countries hold in the construction industry?
2. The work of the UITBB women's committee has shown that women are up against particular problems: training, equal pay, respect, etc. What are your aims and actions to make progress on these matters?

Their Replies:

Bomba Bagna Makawabé:

1. Today Togolese women play an important role in the building industry, as women technicians are



to be found in building design, civil engineering, mechanics, metallurgy and all spheres of construction. It is thanks to the unions that they have been able to make progress. Women in Togo have no major problem concerning vocational training, wages or getting work. They have the same diplomas and wages as men and do the same work.

2. Our aim is above all to promote awareness and increase training possibilities so as to eradicate all discrimination in the construction industry. Our main innovation is the establishment by the women's committee of a study circle whose main aim is to promote awareness and communication so that women may have a better understanding of their rights and duties in the working environment.

Maimouna Bamba:

1. In Mali there are not many women in the construction industry. In my opinion the main causes of this are: a lack of women in the initial stages of vocational training for technical trades; the physical demands of certain trades within the industry; a lack of credit for financing projects, which reduces



job possibilities. Women are mainly to be found in the informal sector as providers or users of building materials. For example, they work in groups to dig sand and then deliver it to various building sites. In rare cases they can be found in research offices.

2. In order to make progress with the problems facing women with regard to access to certain building trades, we have set ourselves the following targets:

- Ensuring training for women, at the same time encouraging them to take up technical trades.
- Giving women confidence by publicizing women's success in the construction industry in other countries.

In order to promote these aims we are in the process of getting women together in trade associations and craft groups, which will help us to analyse the specific problems faced by different individuals.



Yet the world keeps on turning

2009 marks the 50th anniversary of the Cuban revolution and the 70th anniversary of the founding of the union centre CTC of Cuba. This gives the UITBB the opportunity to voice our active solidarity with the Cuban workers and to ask Argelio Quevedo, general secretary of the construction workers' union, what his organisation thinks these two anniversaries mean for the Cuban population, their economic and social rights, women's place in society and equal opportunities.



The foundation of the CTC (workers' centre of Cuba) was a step in the continuous progress of unity led by Cuban revolutionaries, starting with José Martí right up to the foundation in the 1890s of the Revolutionary Party of Cuba which brought together all revolutionaries at the time, thus leading them towards the inevitable war of our people's liberation from the Spanish imperialists. This freedom was short-lived as it was snatched away by the intervention of the United States, our powerful neighbour, which turned us into a colony again.

It is not a coincidence that the CTC was founded on 28 January 1939, the birthday of our country's motivator, José Martí, nor that its founding congress was able to bring together all Cuban workers in one organisation. We had to wait 20 years, however, for the victory of the revolution of 1st January

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PALESTINE: UNITED NATIONS DECISIONS MUST BE IMPLEMENTED

The destruction and killings have stopped in the Gaza Strip, yet there is no immediate prospect for the Palestinian people to have a viable state on their own soil as is their right.

Not only is there no such prospect in sight, but Israel continues with complete impunity to destroy Arab houses in Jerusalem, and Palestine territory is still divided and vulnerable. For the readers of the UITBB Bulletin we have conducted a joint interview with Hasan Bargouthi, director general of the centre for democracy and workers' rights in Palestine, and Michalis Papanikolau, UITBB secretary.

Q. Some months after the Israeli occupation, what is the situation in the Gaza Strip?

Hasan Bargouthi:

Gaza today is a place where 1,600,000 people are imprisoned with the greatest difficulty in obtaining food and health services. More than 45,000 people have no homes, half a million women and children suffer from serious psychological traumas, especially the inability to sleep and nightmares, and children are afraid of being separated from their parents.

Over 65% of the infrastructures have been destroyed and 85% of the population are living below the poverty line on about 200 dollars a month. 90% of the population is dependent on humanitarian aid.

Michalis Papanikolau:

What is happening there is an attempt to preserve the geostrategic interests of the imperialist forces in the Middle East. The framework envisaged by the United States will not change, nor will the crimes come to an end until the forces of peace have the upper hand in the world; at the moment solidarity is not enough. The UITBB regularly voices its solidarity with the Palestinian people, but we must persevere. World peace and the weakening of imperialism can only be achieved through a just solution for all the peoples of the Middle East, especially the people of Palestine.

Q. In your opinion what are the conditions for reaching a just peace in Palestine?

Hasan Bargouthi:

We welcome all kinds of support, but 32 years after 1967 we have still not been able to achieve compliance with UN decisions. In my opinion we need to concentrate on two things:



1. Putting greater pressure on governments to bring to an end to their policies based on double standards
2. Demanding the imposition of sanctions until UN resolutions are implemented. In South Africa it was possible to end apartheid by this means and it should be the same for Palestine. The situation in Palestine is a disgrace to humankind.

Michalis Papanikolau:

The trade union movement of every country, and especially the European unions, must play their part in exerting pressure. The Arab trade union movement has an important role in exerting pressure and giving effective support to the Palestinian people.

This has not always happened. Many Arab unions belong to the ITUC – what is their position on Palestine? It is a question worth discussing with them. We demonstrate our solidarity with the Palestinian people as a matter of principle, as can be seen from the initiatives undertaken by the UITBB. The support of progressive forces is also important; all forces are needed in order to reach a solution.

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1959 in order to achieve the genuine unity of our people, unity of the working class and peasants under the leadership of the Communist Party of Cuba.

It is thanks to this unity that we have been able to hold out against almost 50 years of blockade imposed by the United States, and that we have succeeded in realising the dreams of social justice for which so many generations of Cubans have made sacrifices, and achieving the advanced levels of health care, education and social security that our people have today.

The equality of opportunity enjoyed by all our citizens, men and women – the result of the victorious revolution – has enabled women to play a determining role in society. Today 62% of our technical managers are women and they are to be found in all sectors of manufacturing and services. They hold managerial posts at all levels and are an example of discipline and commitment to their work and to the aims of the revolution.

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UITBB Secretariat
POB 281, FIN-00101 Helsinki, Finland
Tel: +358 9 6931130
Fax: +658 9 6931020
Email: rguitbb@kaapeli.fi
Website: www.uitbb.org**



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