

ITUC-AP Peace Message on the 75th Anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki Atomic Bombings



Peace, Labour and ...

3 August 2020

“Leaving behind only shadows and silence”

Two nuclear weapons were detonated over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6th and 9th August 1945, respectively. These two atomic bombings remain the only instances in human history of nuclear weapons being used in armed conflict. Pope Francis, who visited the two cities last year, expressed the tragedy as follows: “Here, in an incandescent burst of lightning and fire, so many men and women, so many dreams and hopes, disappeared, leaving behind only shadows and silence”. The bombings killed between 150,000 and 246,000 people in the two cities, most of whom were civilians, including women and children. Not only did the nuclear weapons have the ability to immediately shed blood, but they also caused health problems and discrimination in *Hibakusha* (the people affected by exposure to the nuclear weapons) and their second and third generations. Happy days and bright futures were taken away from them.

On the 75th Anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings, I would like to take the opportunity to think about peace from the trade union perspective, in particular, with the young.

“War always sacrifices workers”

I recently had the opportunity to read the script of the Nobel lecture made by Léon Jouhaux, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1951 for his efforts to establish the International Labour Organization (ILO). Here I found similar words to what I had heard from a leader of the Afghan trade union movement when I visited Kabul last year. My Afghan friend said, “War benefits the government and always sacrifices workers”. Léon Jouhaux, after the similar phrase, continued, “Not only does war kill workers, destroy homes and factories which took them centuries of effort to cultivate, but it also gives man an increasingly acute feeling of his haplessness before the forces of violence, and consequently severely retards his progress toward an age of peace, justice and well-being”.

Labour issues as the root of wars

The vast majority of people want lasting peace without war. So why do wars break out and

how can they be stopped?

Let us look at World War I. At the start of the 19th century, countries of the Western Bloc were equipped with the ability to generate vast wealth, thanks to modern mechanization and systematic mass production. Many workers were supplied from farming areas to industrial areas and mines and worked under exploitative conditions characterized by low wages and long working hours. Capitalists continued to benefit from increased production with low labour costs. As a result, and coupled with the low level of personal consumption among the people including workers, products were not sold out on the domestic market. Therefore, the Great Powers started colonizing African and Asian countries, looking for a market. The competition of colonization caused inter-state tension and finally World War I.

If each of the countries had guaranteed decent working conditions and allocated part of their military expenditure to a policy to secure adequate living standards of the people, the war would not have occurred. Global military expenditure rose to US\$ 1917 billion in 2019 which represents continuous growth since the end of the Cold War. More recently, labour issues have been seen as a major cause of persistent poverty and rising inequality. In addition, wars, conflicts and terrorism have their roots in economic and social deprivation of the toiling masses. Labour issues are not only a problem for working people, but are also of global importance and affect us all. Therefore, if labour issues can be ameliorated even a little, hope will dawn regarding many other issues.

Protecting workers should be done by national legislation. However, improving working conditions in a country will weaken the competitiveness on the international market. Discussions about the idea of improving working conditions jointly in all countries began in the 1890s among European and American trade unions with Léon Jouhaux playing a pivotal role. Discussions continued even during World War I despite the difference between the Entente and the Alliance, which led to the adoption of the Treaty of Versailles and the establishment of the ILO.

The ILO is an international organization which sets international labour standards to support the efforts of individual countries in jointly promoting the protection of workers. The ILO, comprising representatives of its constituents, namely governments and employers' and workers' organizations, has adopted various standards, including an eight-hour day and a 40-hour week, maternity protection and the abolition of forced labour. It has also assisted its member countries in applying them in the national context.

“Representatives of workers and employers join in free discussion and democratic decision”

In 1944, during World War II, tripartite constituents of the ILO, namely governments and employers' and workers' organizations, adopted the Declaration of Philadelphia and reaffirmed principles to establish stronger post-war labour governance. Here, I will focus on two principles:

*“Freedom of expression and of association are essential to sustained progress”; and
“The war against want requires to be carried on with unrelenting vigour within each nation, and by continuous and concerted international effort in which the representatives of workers and employers, enjoying equal status with those of governments, join with them in free discussion and democratic decision with a view to the promotion of the common welfare”.*

Ordinary people, including those who work diligently and enjoy leisure time with their friends and families, want decent work and universal social protection to mitigate risks associated with unemployment, ill health, disability and old age. The current pandemic of COVID-19 has made it clearer what policies we need.

However, the existence of those who are eager to maximize their wealth and rule over others, cannot be denied. We all live with different ideas and values. Sometimes these differences, if emphasized, may become a reason to exclude and confront others. Therefore, we need governance to embrace different ideas, balance various interests and increase the benefits to all. In particular, we expect leaders to be in touch and in tune with life as it is lived in our community. However, most leaders, just like us, prefer to be surrounded by those who validate what they already believe. Furthermore, some leaders divide the people into allies and enemies and increase the support from their allies by attacking the enemies with discriminatory words. Consequently, even those leaders who have been elected through what are considered democratic procedures, in many cases do not listen to all voices, but give priority to the interests of only some of their followers, including financial magnates.

Therefore, it is crucially important for workers to “discuss their opinions freely and associate with others in trade unions”. The struggle for lasting peace, for example, to abolish nuclear weapons, requires international effort in which workers and their trade unions can participate in “free discussion and democratic decision” without fear of reprisal.

Trade unions to achieve social justice

Trade unions are always striving to achieve social justice. The meaning of social justice differs depending on time and place. Nevertheless, in any age and place, people never stop speaking out against things that are not right. Workers speak out about various issues when they are dissatisfied with their work or lives, and they appeal to society with whatever power they have or method available to them. Even if workers meet with great difficulties, society slowly begins to resonate with their demands, causing the state or corporations to take action. As long as there are people who think about what type of society would be desirable and consider it important to work ceaselessly towards the realization of such a society, trade unions must provide a place for these people.

Trade unions, therefore, must represent more workers by organizing them, developing effective structures to democratically represent the voices of workers in different workplaces,

communities and industries, and remain independent of the domination of any political force or business. Young activists, please make the voices of your people much louder within your organizations and countries. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) will assist you to enhance the growth and strength of representative, democratic and independent national trade unions in building workers' power.

The title of my message is "Peace, Labour and...". Please add after "and..." what you think is your dearest person or thing. You will step forward towards a peaceful world by thinking of it and taking care of it.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Shoya Yoshida', written in a cursive style.

Shoya Yoshida
General Secretary
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