

Moving Hearts

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WITH SLOWING WORLD TRADE AND A COLLAPSE IN CONSUMER DEMAND TRANSPORT WORKERS ARE FACING UNPRECEDENTED CHALLENGES, BUT IT IS ALSO A TIME OF OPPORTUNITY – FOR UNION GROWTH AND FOR UNION PRESSURE TO SHAPE A RECOVERY THAT WILL BUILD A FAIRER WORLD

In air transport there have been alarming falls in passenger and cargo markets. In cargo, for instance, the Asia-Pacific region, which has the biggest market share, has seen a decline of 28.1 per cent drop in cargo traffic over the last year according to transport industry figures. Passenger business is also falling. The US airline industry in November 2008 saw the worst drop in comparable monthly passenger figures since January 2002 and passenger numbers at British airports fell last year for the first time in 17 years.

The crisis is also biting in shipping with a drop in bulk sea freight, plummeting volumes in the container shipping sector and declining freight rates leading to “slashing of capacity and services” – put simply, jobs are being cut and conditions worsening.

One area where there should be a glimmer of hope is public transport given that effective and cheap public transport becomes even more important in a recession, and is essential to economic recovery. Potentially, this could be seen as an opportunity for public, sustainable transport.

For example, it was reported in February that commuters in Sydney, Australia, were abandoning their cars in favour of trains and buses due to economic and environmental concerns and that experts were predicting the start of a fundamental, long-term shift in travel behaviour.

Even so, the trend is that investment in public transport has become more dependent on private financing over the past decade, potentially leaving existing essential services, as well as funding for improved transport infrastructure, vulnerable. UK's Network Rail,

for example, has announced a reduction in investment in infrastructure maintenance by 30 per cent in 2009.

Transport related to tourism is also set to fall. The United Nations World Travel Organization (UNWTO) has reported in the latter half of 2008 that global tourism shrank by one per cent and prospects for 2009 look bleak. But it's not all gloom, according to UNWTO “tourism can play a critical role in the recovery process as a sector with a unique resurgence capacity.”

A snapshot of the effects of the downturn shows there is huge pressure on jobs and pay. As a result, renewed efforts to organise non-union workers is essential. The role of the union in protecting jobs and conditions is likely to have new appeal – it's an opportunity for growth and organising non-union workers can also prevent or lessen wage competition between workers.

Women are predicted to suffer disproportionately from the economic downturn. Recession is expected to increase the number of unemployed women by up to 22 million as global job crisis could “worsen sharply” this year, according to the International Labor Organization. ITF aims to combat this threat and to ensure union presence in areas where women are employed.

The ITF and its members are under no illusions about the painful effect of the crisis, but we recognise there are also opportunities for our unions. It is too much to say that capitalism had been entirely discredited, but the laissez-faire capitalism of recent decades is off the table.

Instead we must promote regulation of markets, the promotion of new forms of socially responsible business practices,

and state investment in infrastructure. A space has opened up for the labour movement to argue for decent, sustainable jobs and for core values of solidarity, equality, freedom and fairness.

The ITF is working hard for its affiliates to assist them in this double challenge or arguing for new ways of doing things, and of building membership. Unions must act now in their political, lobbying and communications campaigns if they are to influence future developments.

In the search for solutions the ITF is promoting education, research, policy and communications strategies across all sections and in all regions to find answers that will work in each area and to put them into effect. This involves commissioning research reports, of education, lobbying, and communicating a message to the public that lifts the image of unions and carries a simple but emphatic message – that transport workers are vital to the global economy.

The ITF also aims to step up its monitoring and gathering of data on job losses and union strategies to combat them, including the setting up of an ITF “hotline” and website areas with downloadable resources, as well as quick distribution of economic crisis news.

At the heart of the strategy under consideration is a “union assistance” element, geared to support for unions hard hit by the crisis. This could coordinate between different unions in the same multi national companies.

If unions are to answer the global call for action to build a recovery worthy of the name they have to review their work and activities and bring fresh energy into the process of union-building and job protection. Just as important will be the need for a combative approach to putting workers jobs and their rights at the heart of the agenda for recovery.

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