**ILO DIRECTOR-GENERAL GUY RYDER’S SPEECH TO UNI CONGRESS**

**19 JUNE 2018, LIVERPOOL**

Firstly, congratulations to the new General Secretary, Christie, on your election – you can count on the ILO for all the support we can provide.

Congress,

Greetings from the International Labour Organization.

Thank you for inviting me. I was born 3 miles from this hall, and I used to be a staffer for UNI’s founder organization FIET – so this is a great experience.

Listening to your debate yesterday, I heard many delegates speak about the future of work. Your reflections on it, your plans, your hopes – but all too often as well your fears and your worries too.

There are good reasons why this debate is with us today. It’s on TV, it’s in the newspapers, in the electronic media too, in a way that it has not been for a generation.

Here are two such reasons:

* Firstly, obviously, because the world of work is undergoing transformative change of a speed, on a scale, and so far-reaching that we can truly say we have not seen the like before.

And when we consider this change we think technology – big data, digitalization, robotics, A.I. – and of course it is about all of that; but it is about much else as well:

* + climate change and how the world of work needs to become the instrument of a just transition to a sustainable future – probably the biggest change to our production system that we have ever seen;
  + demography, as the aging societies of the North co-exist with the youthful South;
  + and the never more uncertain forward path of globalization.
* Secondly, we tackle these extraordinary challenges at a time of the greatest danger, of a degradation in the political discourse of public life, which is being dragged onto terrain that even a few years ago could not, would not have been accepted. We live at a time when telling the truth in politics appears to be optional: if the facts are inconvenient then ignore them or better still change them; when paying taxes in the corporate world seems to be optional too – if they are too high here, pay them somewhere else or not at all. When the harsh realities of rejection of which the Reverend Barber spoke yesterday mean turning desperate refugees back to their fate at sea; separating infants from their parents at frontiers, because they lack the right papers. When the extraordinary opulence of the few co-exists with the growing deprivation and poverty of the many.

And what is all the more deplorable in this situation is the widespread indifference with which it is received. It is as if the extremes of brutality and cruelty to which we are all daily witness evoke nothing more than a collective shrug of the shoulders.

Let’s face it. If the long arc of history does indeed bend towards social justice, there are also times when it takes a diversion in the opposite direction, and this is one of them. We have entered into an age of a new brutalism where it is OK to dehumanize those who are rejected, who are marginalized, who are different or who disagree. It is the brutalism of the 1930s and we have no excuse – the international organized labour movement least of all – if we don’t learn the lessons, heed them and act upon them.

Congress,

The point I want to put to you this afternoon – it is a simple one – is that if organized labour and its allies do not mobilize to do what it takes to shape the future of work that we want and the world needs, then that future will be imposed by the agenda of the new brutalism, an agenda in which labour rights, inclusion, social justice, decent work, sustainability and indeed democracy have no place.

And have no illusions, the future is not predetermined for us. It has to be won. Decent work for all is possible – but you and we have to make it happen. And I will leave Liverpool tomorrow in the sure knowledge that all UNI’s strength, commitment, and talent will be directed precisely to that end.

Allow me one comment here. In recent years, decades even, globally the direction of change in the world of work has been detrimental and disadvantageous to working people and their trade unions. And so, unsurprisingly, we have often seen trade unions on the defensive – because defending the status quo is a less bad option than ceding to damaging change. It’s been like shoring up the flood protections to stop the water coming in.

But when it comes to the future of work that defensive stance will not work. It cannot, because the size of the transformation that is coming and is already with us will be too great. The need will be to turn the tide of change, not simply defend against it. As Philip said yesterday it is about putting the human being back in control and shaping a future accordingly, so that once again the arc of history will indeed bend once more towards social justice.

Congress,

It is precisely with this imperative that the ILO established its Global Commission on the Future of Work as part of its initiative to mark its centenary in 2019. It is a quality Commission, co-chaired by President Ramaphosa of South Africa and Prime Minister Löfven of Sweden, and your ex-General Secretary Philip Jennings is an active, agitating and valuable member. Its report will be published next January and we have high ambitions for it as a catalyst for change, for action, on the future of work that we want. It will be a following wind for the journey that UNI will take over the next four years.

I want to close by underlining just what is at stake. I don’t know how many delegates here were present at the last UNI Congress in Cape Town, but I doubt that many of those who were could possibly have foreseen the dangerous course that the world has taken in the four years since. And that means we should not overestimate our capacity to predict where it will be when you gather again in Toronto in four years’ time. But I will make one prediction. If we simply continue along the path that we are heading today, if the drift towards brutalism continues, if we let it continue until it is too late to change, then we can expect little good for working people.

However history provides the best argument that trade unions are the best agents of positive change, the key to mobilizing and the core of the alliances which have been built, that are being built and that you will continue to build - the edifice of social justice for which together we strive.

So Christie, we’ll be with you the next 4 years. And all I want to say about Philip is that he is an individual with real values of solidarity and decency in his professional work but also in his personal life and with his colleagues. That is important enough to be mentioned, and it is rare enough to be important. Thank you.