

National Project Conference of Turkey: Organising and Social Dialogue

Opening speech by Henk van der Kolk, President of FNV Bondgenoten, the Netherlands
Ankara, 15 June 2009

- Good morning ladies and gentleman. On behalf of our delegation from the Netherlands, I should like to thank you for your warm welcome.
- It is good to be here. Especially in these difficult times of global economic crisis.
- It is certainly keeping us trade union people occupied. On a daily basis - in the Netherlands and everywhere else in the world - we are being informed about drastic reorganisations within companies. People who, until recently, still enjoyed job security are now being made redundant. We, as trade union officials, are doing everything in our power in an attempt to limit the effects for our members as far as possible.
- To make things even worse, governments are introducing all kinds of cost-saving measures that place the burden of this crisis directly on the workers. Workers who, in fact, had absolutely nothing to do with the causes of this crisis.
- In the Netherlands, the government intends to raise the retirement age from 65 to 67. The Dutch trade union movement is mobilising the workers they represent in order to prevent the introduction of these blatantly unjust plans and to advocate better alternatives. We are trying to achieve this with the employers and independent experts in the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands.
- And I assure you that we will succeed! We will succeed in developing the power to steer the minds of politicians towards more socially acceptable concepts.

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- In the meantime we will also need to look further ahead. How did this crisis manage to erupt in such an uncontrolled manner? Are we, as a trade union movement, actually sufficiently equipped to deal with the new relations that have resulted from the most recent wave of economic globalisation?
- As a result of the developments in the ICT sector - the digital revolution - multinationals have broken up their production processes to a great extent.
- They are giving their brands a golden glow of social responsibility by applying slick public relations techniques. But the other side of the same coin tells a different story altogether. A story of rock-hard cost management, outsourcing activities, and exchanging permanent employment relationships for unsecured or short-term employment contracts.
- It is good to be here to formulate some answers together. To build up a real social Europe together. To work together towards social justice on a world-wide scale.

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- How can we develop power to achieve effective results in social dialogue with employers and the political arena?
- I am looking forward to the discussions that will take place today and tomorrow.
- I definitely also look forward to Mr Dincer's contribution, Turkey's Minister of Social Affairs. After all, Turkey belongs to and forms an integral part of a social Europe!

- The Netherlands has a special relationship with Turkey.
- In this respect, I don't only mean that people have discovered Turkey as a beautiful, sunny holiday destination with friendly, hospitable people.
- During the 1960s and 1970s, the years of major economic growth in the Netherlands, many Turkish labourers came to our country to work in our plants. They occupied a place in our society and also found their way to the trade union that looked after their interests.
- Today, many children of this first generation of immigrant workers are active trade union officials. They have integrated excellently into Dutch society while, fortunately, never losing their ties with their mother country.
- Two of these trade union officials, Celil, who is here today in his wheelchair, and Osman undertook the preliminary work for this project on organising and social dialogue in Turkey. They put forward a strong case for obtaining support from my trade union, FNV Bondgenoten, for this important project.
- It has taken several years for this decision to be actually finalised. But now we can dedicate ourselves fully to the project. Let us learn from each other how we can look after the interests of workers as efficiently and effectively as possible.

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- In all honesty, however, this is not taking place under fortunate circumstances.
- In the Netherlands we are still recovering from the outcome of the European Parliamentary elections.
- Those who had expected that the economic crisis - which, in fact, signified the collapse of neo-liberal policy in the European Union - would help parties towards a more social Europe, have had a rude awakening.
- In the Netherlands, the Party for Freedom, a Dutch right-wing political party, was a major winner. I feel almost embarrassed to state that, with xenophobic and nationalistic rhetoric, their party leader, Geert Wilders, managed to gain four out of twenty-five Dutch seats while they had none beforehand.

- Wilders' ultra-liberals have now become the second party in the Netherlands, just behind the conservative Christian Democrats. They claim to be anti Islam, and against Turkey's entry to the EU. 'Not this year, not next year, not in a million years!'
- So here we sit?
- Fortunately, although these election results were a cause for great concern, the Dutch xenophobes and ultra-liberals who want to destroy the power and social protection of the welfare state, do not hold a position of supremacy.
- In these times of media democracy, some people no longer vote, by definition, in accordance with their own interests. They tend to vote on the basis of a gut feeling for an easily-recognisable politician who uses one-liners to stir their innate fear of the unknown.
- As a Dutch trade union we will need to find the right tone to convince the working population that only harmonious, social solutions - with respect for fundamental labour rights - will yield prosperity.

- In a social Europe it is important that we approach each other honestly with regard to suppression and the sowing of hatred. We have all-too-often witnessed what this can lead to, throughout history.
- A social Europe, a social world, cannot exist without respect for fundamental human and workers' rights, as stated in the International Labour Organisation treaties. The right to freedom of association and collective bargaining on employment conditions. The right to a living wage, to safe work, and to social protection.
- During the preparations for this project, to our surprise, we learnt how freedom of association is obstructed in Turkey. Workers need to go to a notary public to have their membership officially recognised. In practice, this simple rule is a serious obstacle to developing healthy, powerful trade unions.
- Prosperity can only be achieved by respecting the interests of all the players in a socio-economic society.
- In the Netherlands we have developed a tradition of social dialogue in our so-called Polder Model, an internationally-acclaimed, democratic, consultative structure. My trade union delegation will tell you more about this tomorrow morning.
- But we also know, perhaps better than most, that such dialogue will only lead to effective results for all if it is based on the power of the workers and democratic unions. Only then will a strong, authoritative input be possible.

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- This is easier said than done.

- In the meantime, trade unions all over the world are losing their strength. It is no longer a natural thing to join the trade union when you start to work. Young people find all the information they want on the Internet and think that they can look after their own interests.
- As a result of the effects of the most recent wave of globalisation, the trade union movement is having difficulty in maintaining influence. On the one hand, this is due to the lower level of unionisation, but on the other, it is also due to the internationalisation of trade and industry. The trade union movement is slowly lagging behind.
- Multinationals - such as the Dutch companies AkzoNobel and Unilever that are also active in Turkey - do not allow others to interfere in their global corporate policy. Unions are only allowed to look after workers' interests at the local level to cushion the consequences of outsourcing and cost-cutting. And that's it.
- My union, however, has developed a tool to get a better grip on multinationals, the FNV Company Monitor. This tool is used to monitor companies, conduct research, and develop networks for active trade unionists, with Unilever and Akzo Nobel, among others.
- We need to find new avenues to regain influence on the social policy of multinationals. This can only be done through international cooperation.

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- Unilever is a good example in this respect. Only recently, here - in Turkey - there was a labour dispute with a company to which management had outsourced logistics activities. This would save costs, especially if the supplier is not very interested in upholding social rights.
- Unilever receives one award after the other for its corporate social responsibility. But, in the meantime, the Management Board, in its beautiful office in the Dutch city of Rotterdam, turns its back on social responsibility where the supply chain is concerned.
- Prior to the most recent shareholders' meeting we wrote a supplement to the annual report in cooperation with the IUF, the global union federation for the food industry, and our British sister union Unite, which we handed to the shareholders.
- In the meantime, we are undertaking action on behalf of day labourers at an outsourced plant in Pakistan, which produces tea for the Unilever Lipton brand. The workers would like to have a permanent contract for what is, in fact, permanent work. They are proud to produce Lipton and therefore like to work for Unilever. But they also want to earn enough to be able to send their children to school and to drink a real cup of Lipton tea themselves once in a while.
- The power that we are building up as a trade union movement is already proving to be effective. After refusing initially, Unilever has now entered into talks with the IUF.

- This is a fine example of how things can be achieved. Remain calm and reasonable, but adamant. Work together at the international level. Enter into dialogue with governments and companies - based on your own strength.
- I am really looking forward to the discussions about how we can develop power and create strong international ties - especially between our beautiful countries: the Netherlands and Turkey.