

**INTERVIEW WITH NICOLA BULLARD, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF FOCUS ON THE
GLOBAL SOUTH
BANGKOK, THAILAND**

BY JERRY HARRIS

JH. Tell me about the work of Focus on the Global South.

NB. Focus on the Global South was set-up about six years ago. Our mission is policy and advocacy work on the issues of globalization, particularly in the South. This encompasses different aspects, such as culture and technology, but most of our work is on economic impacts like trade and the integration of developing countries into the global economy. That became sharply defined during the Asian financial crisis when all the contradictions were so clearly laid out.

JH. Can you tell about the international conference you held in March?

NB. It's called The Bangkok International Roundtable of Trade Unions, Social Movements and NGOs. Our principal interests are the social clauses debate which has been around the WTO for two years now. Of course it's a contentious issue. There are splits on whether or not we should have some type of labor and environmental sanctions in the WTO. The trade unions and International Labor Organization have been strong proponents of sanctions, but a lot of groups in the South say it's disguised protectionism. The wrong solution for a wrongly diagnosed problem. Given the way in which the new internationalism has emerged it has become an increasingly important basis for dialogue between the trade unions and different social movements.

This conference is one of many initiatives that are taking place in all parts of the world to try and build some links. The trade unions and social movements come out of very different histories. Structurally they are very different and their decision making process is different. So we have to find a new way to articulate our actions, make decisions and propose solutions. And it's important to find constructive ways to do that.

JH. What are some of the trade unions and groups that are coming?

NB. The International Confederation of Trade Unions, the Korean Federation of Trade Unions, the CUT from Brazil, IG Metal which is one of the big industrial unions from Germany, the TUC from Ghana, Canadian Auto Workers, the AFL-CIO, and many others. There is in fact strong trade union representation. Also there will be a number of organizations strongly linked to the trade unions such as Jobs for Justice from the US.

Some of the social movements groups here are ATTAC from France, MST from Brazil, the indigenous organization CONAIE from Ecuador, Assembly of the Poor from Thailand, Via Campesina from Indonesia, as well as others.

JH. The social clause debate centers on creating sanctions around issues such as child labor, the freedom to organize and fair wages in the global South. Some countries like India have said this is just an attempt to create trade barriers against their goods. But in the US a large section of the anti-global movement is active in opposing sweatshops and corporations like NIKE. A lot of people come out of the 1980s solidarity movements with Central America and are now taking on labor issues. How do you think this will play out in the conference, are these demands that should be made in the North, or should they be left up to the local trade union groups within the South?

NB. I think the demands should be made. It's an absolute imperative that child labor, worker's rights, the protection of workers, the right to organize, all these things have to be promoted and protected. But we have to think about what is the best and most effective way to do that. We have to look at the contradictions within the system as it exists now. The whole logic of the market pushes down wages with investments moving from one low wage area to the next. I don't think we can solve the problem by simply putting another layer of rules on an existing set of bad rules. The WTO rules are very unfair in their benefits and marginalize very large sectors of the working population.

For example, if we look at the agreement on agriculture it is heavily biased in favor of the huge agricultural producers in the US and European Union. It favors agribusiness and export orientated agriculture. There is no place within the agreement for small-scale local production, sustainable agriculture, or any of the important questions that effect the vast majority of the developing world. If you look at developing countries about 60% of the working population are dependent on agricultural production or farming for their livelihood.

In fact, if we're really interested in working people and in the South we need to pay attention to people in the non-formal sector and people in the agricultural sector. We have to look at how these trade agreements and financial organization affect the conditions for these people. Then we can start to talk about how do we organize, how do we work on the basis of solidarity and organizing people in all sectors. As it stands the proposals for the social clauses really focus on people in the formal sector who already have the possibility to organize. Who already have a relative advantage because they are skilled or semi-skilled. The reality of the labor force in the developing world is a dual system where you have this huge pool of available labor. So in strictly economic terms you can't push up the price of industrial labor without dealing with the surplus in the agricultural and non-formal sectors.

JH. When you were at the global meeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil did you find any interesting examples of movements or countries dealing with the issue of child labor?

NB. There have been some really innovative responses to some of these issues. In Brazil, the Workers Party had the governorship of Brazilia for about five years in the 1980s. During that time they implemented a whole series of grounded, practical, innovative community based, community endorsed projects. They were designed to make the city safer, to keep kids in school, and to support mothers so they could look after their kids properly. It did things like paying scholarships so kids went to school. This dealt in a very practical way with this question of child labor. Because kids don't go to work because they want to go to work, they go to work because

their families are poor or their parents can't afford to keep them in school. Now if you make it possible for families to keep their kids in school every family would choose their child's education. What they did in Brazil is give people the choice because they made it possible for families to afford to keep their kids in school. They also developed a program in which families could increase their income by training women to improve their employability.

JH. This is an interesting point because so much of the new labor force are women. Some interesting examples have emerged in India and Mexico that tie together the women's social movement and labor because their demands extend to their families, to their children and home, as well as work. Do you think women as a new force in labor can be the factor that brings together the social movements and labor?

NB. Yes and no, I think that neo-liberalism has been one of the big systematic attacks on labor unions. At the same time I think the unions also weakened themselves during the 1990s because they had no capacity to accommodate either the environmental movement or the women's movement. It's an old story but it's still true. The trade unions are still paying the price and I don't think that story is finished yet. At the local and national level a lot of things have been solved because people have been in very concrete struggles where they have had to form alliances and come up with solutions.

One of the reasons for the conference is that the issue hasn't been resolved at the international level. It's the first time since the early part of the 20th century where there has been a real international labor movement. So we have to find a way of working together. At the moment the women's movement is not very strong in the anti-globalization movement. I think there is a hell of a lot of work for everyone to do in terms of bringing both the ecological and feminist critic to globalization. What you have is a number of worlds colliding: the trade union world, the feminists, the ecologists, the developing world and disinfected political party activists. All of these activists' worlds are colliding at the international level. So we have to find a way of articulating not only our demands and proposals, but also articulating different organizational traditions, histories and ways of working. It's not easy to do that because organizations and institutions are very different.

JH. Perhaps we can turn to some theoretical questions and the nature of the capitalist class. A popular view sees globalization based on large international corporations that compose national blocs, are promoted by their national state, and compete worldwide. But perhaps there is a developing world capitalist class taking form through international mergers, complex alliances, and the integration of finance and speculative capital. This class has competitive contradictions, but is guided by global accumulation strategies where they invest, employ and market worldwide. In this case the nation state becomes less important as a base of operations. I know at the Global South you view globalization mainly as a project of US hegemony. Can you contrast that to this view that sees the nation state as secondary to an emerging world bourgeois.

NB. The world is in a period of transition and flux where it could go in the direction your suggesting, but I think the style of American capitalism is becoming the dominant form for

globalization. As a global form of capitalism you do get an internationalization of the capitalist class, but it's very difficult to escape their embeddedness in national structures. Obviously the US systematically promotes the interests of its own corporations and actively intervenes in other places to promote its model of capitalism. At the same time you get the WTO and World Bank implementing the rules of US style capitalism. So the institutions themselves are embedded in nation state realities. The major characteristics of geopolitics are the contradictions that have emerged between the European Union and US in finance, defense, military strategy, and a whole range of issues. So what is taking place is a struggle between models of capitalism.

Take Germany, who was dragged kicking and screaming into this model. There is a big debate about globalization in Germany because they had this island of security. They were protected from global markets because they are an exporting industrialized economy. But in fact they haven't restructured their workforce, they haven't liberalized the labor market, and now there is tremendous pressure from the corporations and finance markets to make them do so. It was just last year that the German government did not interfere when Vodafone took over Mannesmann. That is an interesting example of where the state did not intervene to protect the national capitalist class. So they are selective. They look at how many jobs are lost and what is going to be the public reaction.

Everything is assessed on a case by case basis. They have to look at the political equation at the national level, but also at the international level because they are intertwined so much. National and international politics are not that much different.

JH. Lastly I'd like to ask you about the reaction in Thailand to the Asian financial crisis. What has been the effect on local national politics?

NB. I think nationalism still plays its part, which you find a little bit in Thailand. It's the domestic elite capitalists that are antagonistic to the foreign capitalists, although they do have backing from Japanese capital. However there is a very strong anti-IMF sentiment. This also takes an anti-US form and is stronger since the crash. IMF has become the enemy, the symbol of the end of the dream.

The new Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, is somewhat of a populist. He has offered debt relief for farmers for three years, proposed a national health care system, and a million baht fund for every village. Also some serious action on non-performing loans from the crisis, which were up to 50% for two years and a huge drag on the financial sector. This has acted as a ball and chain on any type of recovery so they want to deal quickly with the bad assets. Basically the government is going to buy them up. Earlier they were auctioned off and General Electric bought-up absolutely billions of baht in mortgages and credit cards at rock bottom prices. So now the government won't write off these losses and sell them, but manage them, get back what they can, and issues bonds to cover the losses. They are saying we can manage our assets, we don't need foreign companies to buy them up. Thaksin is a capitalist to his fingertips but he represents national Thai capital and not foreign capital. So the problems are not just between the EU and US, but also in the South, especially in Asia where local capital has been strong.