

TEACHERS' RESPONSIBILITIES IN BUILDING A CULTURE OF DEMOCRACY AND PEACE

**Key note address by Mr. Dietmar Kneitschel, Resident Representative FES,
on the occasion of the Workshop
“Rights of members in a trade union”,
organized by Ceylon Tamil Teachers' Union (CTTU),
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Brothers and Sisters, dear friends:

It's a great pleasure and honor for me to address you on the occasion of your workshop on “Rights of members in a trade union.”

Support for the development of independent and democratic trade unionism all over the world is one of the main thrusts of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is a trade union based organization with close relationship to the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB) and her 8 affiliated sector unions with a total membership of around 7.5 million workers.

FES maintains also close cooperation with the most representative international trade union organizations, that is the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the Global Unions, formerly called International Trade Secretariats (ITS), among them Education International (EI) which is the world's largest international trade union organization for the education professions representing national trade unions of teachers and other education workers from nearly all countries.

CTTU is an affiliate of EI.

The main objective of FES is to promote a democratic culture in society and in societal organizations and institutions.

A democratic culture means first that citizens are aware of their rights and responsibilities in state and society.

Democracy needs informed citizens.

A democratic culture means second those citizens have a firm commitment to the values and principles of democracy, that is: freedom of association, opinion and expression, political pluralism, respect for the rights of others, tolerance, non- violence and compromise as the basic method of conflict-resolution.

Democracy needs committed citizens.

And a democratic culture means third active participation of people in institutions and organizations like political parties, trade unions and NGO's.

This way, citizens have influence over and control of political power and decisions.

Democracy therefore needs pro-active citizens.

Democracy will only work if it can count on informed, committed and active citizens.

Trade unions are essential pillars of a democratic society. Without free trade unions there can be no genuine democratic society. Therefore, freedom of association or the right to organize as proclaimed in Convention 87 of the ILO is a constituent feature of a democratic state. .

But in order to fulfill the role of being supporting pillars of a democratic society, trade unions themselves must be democratic organizations.

Trade union democracy or internal democracy is the lifeblood of authentic trade unionism. One can even say that a trade union is a democratic organization, or it is not a trade union at all.

What are the essential characteristics of a democratic union?

1. Trade union democracy means that all members have equal rights as well as duties in the union' s activities, with neither individual privilege nor discrimination, based on gender, religion, ethnicity or cast.

2. Union leaders are not self-appointed, but periodically elected by and from among the membership.

3. Leaders are accountable to the members to whom they owe their mandate. In other words: in a democratic trade union, leaders are not the masters but the servants of the members.

4. All major decisions are taken by majority vote of the members, but with due respect for the rights of the minorities.

Democracy does not mean that a majority can crush a minority.

5. Freedom of expression, peaceful debate, consultation, information sharing, consensus building, cooperation and co-determination are unmistakable characteristics of a democratic society and a democratic organization.

Therefore, a truly democratic society and a truly democratic organization not only tolerate, but also welcome opposition. Because constructive discussion of different opinions and negotiation and compromise are energizers and factors of modernization. Without opposition, a society or an organization would stagnate.

And 6. : Democracy is much more than elections.

It is, above all, active participation by the membership in the union affairs. Trade union work is the responsibility of all members, not just of the leaders.

Only if there is an active participation by all members in trade union life, will trade union democracy be complete.

7. The principle of democracy means also gender democracy. Unions which have a majority of female members but whose leadership is only male cannot be considered gender democratic organizations.

I am noting with great satisfaction that CTTU has made serious efforts to increase

women's' participation in all leadership levels.
But certainly more efforts are required.

There is another principle of authentic trade unionism closely related to the principle of internal democracy.

This is the principle of independence.

A union must not be under the direction, control or tutelage of any external force, be it government, political parties, employers, religious, political or military organizations, influential families, or any other outsider group or individual.

Members of the union must be the masters in their own house.

The union must be directed and controlled only by the members and their elected leaders themselves and must respond exclusively to their interests.

It is especially important not to mix trade unionism with political partisanship.

Trade unions must be free from party-political ties that can restrict their autonomy.

A union should never become a pawn in the party-political game.

Of course, as individuals, trade union members may belong to any political party they like. There should be political pluralism within the union. But the union as a collective should be party-politically independent.

The full realization of the principle of independence requires financial autonomy of the union. A union should make every effort to finance all its activities only through the contributions of its own members.

Therefore external assistance, even from the best of friends, should only be used temporarily, in the formative period or in times of emergency, as a complement to the union dues.

Outside assistance should be employed always with the objective to strengthen the union's own resource generating power, so that external assistance would become unnecessary at the shortest time possible.

Only when a union is reliant on its own resources will it attain maturity, achieve stability and become fully independent.

The primary task of a trade union is working for the economic interests of its members, that means higher salaries and better working conditions. A teachers' union is no exception to this rule.

However, a teachers' union cannot be satisfied with just fighting for the economic interests of teachers.

It should also fight for the rights and interests of its "clients", the students. That means it should do everything to improve the quality and efficiency of the educational system so that students would receive quality education.

And since Sri Lanka is caught in a protracted ethno-political armed conflict, peace education – or teaching the principles and methods of how to respect each other and how to regulate and solve conflicts in a non-violent manner is another task of teachers and their unions.

There is no other profession with a greater responsibility for reconciliation and transformation of the still existing mindset of confrontation, suspicion and violence than that of teachers.

So it is certainly not enough if teachers restrict themselves to teach children how to read, how to write, and how to calculate, and to give them some knowledge of geography and history.

Of at least equal importance is to teach them basic human values: how to live peacefully together, how to cooperate with each other, and how to compromise for the benefit of all segments of society.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes the essential role of education for developing a culture of peace and non-violence by stating the following:

"Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance, friendship among all nations, racial and religious groups and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace."

Developing the ability of children to listen, to discuss, to respect each others views and to compromise without resorting to force is of critical importance in a country caught for 2 decades in a destructive spiral of violence and counter-violence. This violence and counter-violence has eroded the value basis of society and damaged the very social fabric of human dignity and mutual trust on which sustainable peace has to be established.

To overcome the existing culture of mistrust, prejudice, fear, suspicion, intolerance and violence, a change of the mindset and a new positive vision for the future of Sri Lanka is required.

This change of mindset has to take place on both sides of the ethnic divide. Unless such a new culture of mutual respect, confidence, co-operation and compromise is being developed simultaneously on both sides, it will be difficult to find a stable solution of the conflict and build a peaceful future.

But there is no choice. War is no longer a rational option and has never been. Peace based on democracy and justice is an imperative for all communities which live in Sri Lanka. .

Teachers and their organizations should play a leading role in changing the existing culture of war into a culture of peace and re-conciliation.

Education International has a strong commitment in her constitution to education for peace, democracy, justice and equality.

So by membership in EI, CTTU has also assumed that commitment.