**General Secretary’s Report to the BWI World Board 2021**

**Ambet:** Reflecting on the year since the last World Board meeting, I have realised that whilst workers have faced a year of tremendous adversity as a result of the responses to the pandemic and economic decline, BWI affiliates across the world have been beacons of hope. Despite the pandemic, BWI affiliates have been determined to organise workers and represent members, advocate for worker rights and protection of vulnerable workers, challenge anti-union practices and defend democracy. They have shown the value of strong independent democratic unions to fight for the interests of workers and I start my report by acknowledging the achievements of our affiliates through this difficult year.

**Responding to COVID19**

BWI affiliates in the construction, wood and forestry sector led the response to COVID 19 at the workplace level. Unions fought for strong COVID19 protocols, negotiated new ways of working for companies to adapt and survive during the pandemic, saved thousands of jobs by securing job retention schemes, secured packages for terminated workers and have fought unfair labour practices. Affiliates and workers needed our support and BWI responded with a sense of urgency and innovation to the challenges arising from the pandemic.

The BWI Declaration on COVID19 that detailed positions and demands in a number of areas has guided our work since its adoption by the World Board last year. In order to popularise the Declaration, a series of global webinars were held that has reached a total of over 1,300 participants. The first webinar was on migration where affiliates had the opportunity to hear directly from migrant workers of their experiences of the pandemic and the event focused on their vulnerability and verified the need to continue to advocate for migrant rights. The global webinar on health and safety was the most popular in the series, addressing a real and urgent need for affiliates to hear of work being done on OHS in relation to COVID-19.

Other webinars in the series included, negotiations and bargaining, human rights, gender equality, labour standards in IFI financed projects and networking on MNC to confront corporate power. The webinars continue to be a useful way of bringing together affiliates on issues and have continued in 2021, to discuss stewardship and climate change in relation to the forestry sector and the agenda and actions needed for pandemic recovery.

Programmes run by BWI delivered training to over 3,000 trade unionists in 2020 building capacity and supporting actions on new ways of organising, negotiations, education, campaigning and networking as well as to take up new challenges, particularly on OHS and gender issues. BWI has supported unions to adapt to new ways of organising during the pandemic as well as advocating for the rights of constituents that are difficult to recruit into the unions such as those in the informal sector, daily waged workers and migrants.

**Activating the youth**

New ways of reaching out to workers and engaging union members has benefitted the participation of youth in BWI activities. Youth activists from affiliates across the globe participated in the global online event Let’s Shout Out Together organized by BWI on 12 August for International Youth Day. The BWI International Youth Committee organised and led the global campaign for the Day of Decent Work on October 7 under the theme “Fight for Decent Work. Build A Better Future.”

**Building gender equality**

Our global campaigns have been very successful. Responding to the dramatic increase globally in gender based violence during the pandemic, about one third of our affiliates eagerly participated in the 16 Days Campaign for Trade Union Activism on Violence Against Women. Ahead of the campaign, several training programmes were run on digital campaigning and gender which resulted in dozens of affiliates developing localised campaigns from the ground up. Efforts to build an international campaign to Stop Macho Culture were also initiated in the year.

Our 2021 International Women’s Day campaign was also widely supported by affiliates and called for a gender fair response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to recovery. Exchanges organised under the Women in Trades initiative revealed that the pandemic has been a setback for women in the building, construction, wood and forestry sectors. However, our research found that many affiliates are committed to advocating for gender equity in skills training and employment opportunities, making demands in bargaining to address the specific needs of women and looking to improving the retention of women workers.

here has also been a stronger and more visible presence of women in the last year. The shift to online training and meetings has had a positive impact on women’s participation in activities at all levels. To nuture this development, a Global Women Leadership Training Programme has been launched.

**Leading on health and safety**

Currently, BWI has a joint campaign together with EFBWW to call on the ILO to recognise healthy and safe workplaces as a fundamental right, take the opportunity created by the growing public awareness of the importance of OHS. The campaign is inspiring action by affiliates across the globe to negotiate with employers to sign declarations acknowledging OHS as a fundamental worker right.

OHS has been a priority this year and BWI has supported trainings on COVID19 at workplace level and to build union capacity. We have helped our affiliates formulate demands on OHS regarding COVID19 and we have documented their responses to the pandemic. BWI has produced regional reports on BWI Affiliates Action around COVID-19, conducted research on COVID 19 in the Construction Sector and is advocating for the recognition of COVID19 as an occupational disease. We have given input on guidelines and other documents by the WHO and the ILO on COVID19 related to the sectors represented by BWI. In order to promote safe practices during the pandemic, BWI **is** developing a practical guide for trade unions on COVID19, covering how to take precautions at union offices and during union activities.

**Confronting the power of capital**

Through our union networks that have been built at regional and global level, BWI has supported strategic organising and supported affiliates to engage in social dialogue and promote decent work, as well as unite over shared challenges being experienced by workers and to provide solidarity to those experiencing unique challenges during the pandemic.

Several MNCs have not been taking responsibility for protecting their workforce during the pandemic and BWI has worked to hold them accountable. We have used our International Framework Agreements to challenge companies such as Faber Castell, Steadler and IKEA on responses that compromised workers.

The Lafarge Global Network together with EFBWW and IndustriALL will be taking up an international campaign after attempts to resolve labour issues with the cement giant using the OECD grievance mechanism have failed. We will continue the fight until worker demands are won.

BWI continues to challenge the International Finance Corporation on the violation of workers’ rights with the mass dismissal of over 5,000 workers at the Karot Hydropower Project in Pakistan. BWI has responded to the needs of affiliates organising workers at projects backed by International Finance Institutions for training on grievance and accountability mechanisms and continues to advocate for decent working conditions through bilateral meetings with the World Bank and the Asia Development Bank on infrastructure projects.

We have a victory after many years of campaigning, the Forestry Stewardship Council finally approved labour requirements within the Chain of Custody standards. This integrates core principles of the ILO Core Conventions and the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at work. This should improve unionisation and bargaining in the sector, which should lead to better wages and working conditions, including health and safety.

**Championing Migrant Rights**

There has been much public attention on migrant workers in Qatar as a result of protests by some teams during March 2021 international qualifying matches regarding Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. BWI continues to work for improvement in Qatar as we see the World Cup as an opportunity to push forward lasting reforms beyond the 2022 FIFA World Cup. We hosted a successful two-day conference on migrant labour rights and the legacy of FIFA that reflected on the progress made on building worker participation and representation in Qatar. The lessons to secure labour rights in Qatar were presented by BWI at the Global Forum on Responsible Recruitment hosted by the Institute for Human Rights and Business International Labour Organization and International Organization for Migration.

BWI is paying particular attention to the plight of migrants during the pandemic, this has included supporting calls for an urgent justice mechanism for pandemic-affected migrant workers. Wage theft became a widespread problem faced by migrant workers and has become an issue widely recognized by human rights groups as well other international institutions as an issue that should be addressed at international level.

On International Migrant Workers Day, BWI issued a statement together with the International Organisation of Employers on strengthening migrant workers' social protection systems. BWI also presented ideas on the inclusion of migrants in recovery plans at an event held by the International Organisation of Employers at the Global Forum on Migration and Development early in 2021.

**Solidarity Actions**

Challenges for our unions have extended beyond the workplace, in the last year the response to the pandemic has often compromised political participation and inclusion and many right-wing governments used the pandemic as an opportunity to restrict civic space. There has been an increase in violation of human rights and numbers of repressive forces have often targeted our trade union leaders that are on the forefront of the struggle for justice.

During Much of 2021 we have been providing intensive solidarity actions to support our worker leaders in Myanmar that have been in the forefront of protests against the military coup. We are hopeful for the restoration of democracy in Myanmar and BWI supports the National Unity Government that has been established.

BWI has actively campaigned with affiliates on the dire political situation in Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Haiti, Philippines and Hong Kong. We have joined other progressive forces to criticise the genocidal handling of COVID19 in Brazil by the Bolsonaro government. We have also extended solidarity to trade union actions fighting anti-union policies and labour law reforms in several countries including India and Indonesia.

**Ambet:** It has been a phenomenal year of unity and support as unions have learnt from each other, shared resources and decided on positions to take on new challenges together. Despite our best efforts, thousands of workers in the building construction, wood forestry and allied sectors have faced hardships this year, including lost wages and jobs and uncertainty. Many of our affiliates have suffered setbacks losing membership and revenue, especially those with small membership bases in low income and middle-income countries. As we grapple with the pandemic, one of the lessons emerging is that we need to build more resilient unions and at the heart of this is sustainability not only as organisational entities but as the embodiment of worker power.

**Building a better future**

BWI has recently released a global COVID-19 report detailing the response of our affiliates to the pandemic. It also presents a pandemic recovery agenda calling for the creation of decent, safe, green jobs with respect for union and workers’ rights, and meaningful social dialogue on all economic and social recovery plans.

Policy and investment are needed to transition to a greener and cleaner economy to reduce carbon emissions and ensure a just transition for workers through retraining and employment support programmes. Now is the time to ensure that decent jobs are part of the green shift. BWI is currently in discussions with C40, a network of the world’s megacities working on climate change, to formalise a cooperation towards a just and green transition, and support the Clean Construction Declaration.

Governments must ensure public investment in labour intensive work such as infrastructure, roads, housing projects, schools and health care facilities. Central to the recovery agenda must be social inclusion through equity measures to address discrimination in employment faced by women, migrant workers, young workers and other vulnerable groups.

**Ambet:** While we focus on calls for environmental and socially just economic recovery plans, we also recognise that vaccine role out is affected by entrenched global inequalities and in most countries, the pandemic may have several more waves that will have a sustained impact on wages, jobs, livelihoods and lives. We cannot build back what was not there to begin with so let us focus our energies on building a better future for all.

Stay well and Be safe.