



VALTER SANCHES

GENERAL SECRETARY OF INDUSTRIALL GLOBAL UNION



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interview

Union: **IndustriALL Global Union**

Country: **Brazil**

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On 5 October 2016, Valter Sanches from Brazilian union CNM/CUT, was elected General Secretary of IndustriALL Global Union. Sanches, a former metalworker and life-long trade union activist, will lead IndustriALL for the next four years.

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Can you tell us a little about your upbringing in Brazil?

I was born in South Brazil in Paraná in the countryside. When I was six years old, my family, like many in Brazil, had to move to Sao Paulo after the terrible freeze in agriculture during the 1960s. Most people lost everything, as we did.

Like many Brazilians I started working at 16 years old. A year later, I joined a mechanical engineering plant as a machine worker. In 1985, when I was 21, I moved to Rolls Royce working as a technician, later moving to Mercedes Benz as a production engineer.

When and why did you get involved in union activities?

I became a member of a union as soon as I started at the engineering plant when I was 17 years old. We were living under a dictatorship so **I had a strong urge to fight against injustice and the lack of freedom during those times, as well as the economic problems.** The end of the dictatorship was followed by a succession of neo-liberal governments, which brought a lot of problems for workers, so getting involved with the union came naturally.

The first elected position I had was for the internal health and safety commission, which is obligatory under Brazilian legislation. I was later elected to the Works Council at Mercedes Benz in 1992 and I got re-elected plenty of times.

You have a degree in geography from the university of Sao Paulo – how did you fit that in?

When I was 20 years old, it was rare for a factory worker to go to university; it was a very narrow oriented society. There was a big bottleneck and few vacancies for the millions of people who wanted to go to university. In Brazil, it's more common for people like me to do a night course and work in the daytime. So that's what I did. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to work in a factory for the rest of my life or whether I wanted to do something in research or with geography.

However, militancy was in my blood so I thought that, even if I was putting my career second, I would be more useful if I remained in the plant and got more involved in the union fighting for workers' rights and social justice. I got a national position at CNM/CUT in 2003 and then had several more positions there, including general secretary and at the end, international secretary.

How would you describe your union career so far?

My whole life I've been breaking through barriers. I was the first Brazilian in the World Works Council; I was in the working group that negotiated our global framework agreement at Daimler (Mercedes Benz's parent company) in 2002; and then I was the first Brazilian and I am still the only non-German on the supervisory board at Daimler. And now I am the first general secretary of a global union from the Global South in the history of IndustriALL and its predecessor organizations.



Why is it relevant for IndustriALL to have a leader from the Global South?

Of course every affiliate wants to have someone who is well qualified, is democratic, and who is in constant consultation with them, so those are the main requirements.

But being from the South means that I bring other experiences. In the past, most of those responsible for global unions were either from Europe or North America. It's not that they don't have the sensibilities for developing countries but it's an additional experience when you actually live in those conditions - under a very anti-union environment, under dictatorships or neo-liberal governments, under severe repression, under precarious working conditions driven by multinationals corporations and their supply chains.

What challenges are IndustriALL and its affiliates facing?

I have been a trade unionist for most of my life and I think there are a lot of challenges in the world to be addressed. I was involved in international solidarity work for a long part of my time in my union so I decided to take on the challenge.

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Precarious work is a major challenge. Even in Germany, with the best working conditions in the world, capital finds a way to sneak in precarious work in the form of contractors and agency work.

We have to build stronger unions to combat precarious work, otherwise there will be many job losses in countries that won't be generating quality jobs elsewhere. So we must help unions to get stronger, to build membership, to get better training for workers to do their jobs. We have to act in solidarity every time one of us is under attack.

On top of everything, we are in the middle of a technological leap (Industry 4.0) that will affect, and is already affecting, all industry. In the near future, entire sectors will disappear. Some others will arise but they will most probably generate far fewer jobs. That's why we must strive for sustainable industrial policies in countries and in the regions. We have got to get as strong unions as possible so that we can demand that governments give us a seat at the table to get good industrial policies and resist the power of transnational companies.

How do you think IndustriALL needs to develop over the next four years?

We have to make some improvements in our structures, in our regions and the whole work of IndustriALL so that we can better serve our affiliates. In the last period, IndustriALL delivered lots of good things and had many successful campaigns. The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh has been a great success, setting up a legally binding structure to inspect and remediate more than 1,600 garment factories in the country.

The Rio Tinto campaign has brought together affiliates from operations around the world, demanding that the mining giant engage in dialogue with the unions. While we still have more work to do, the Rio Tinto campaign has forced the company to make real changes, replacing some anti-union mine managers and opening the door for our affiliates to organize more of their worksites.

And I would say that our many trade union networks in multinational companies are another achievement. However, we can better communicate and consult with affiliates when it's an issue that affects them and benefit from their input.

Crucially, we need to use the strength that we have in our trade union networks and our global framework agreements to make multinational companies accountable for their supply chains. We also need to help the unions that organize the supply chain workers, that's really where most of the precarious work lies.