



Berthold Huber

Berthold Huber rose from an apprentice toolmaker in a bus factory to become leader of the world's biggest national union, German metalworkers' union, IG Metall, and President of IndustriALL Global Union. Huber, who says his role as President is to be the voice of affiliates, will step down at IndustriALL's Congress in Rio in October.

interview

Union: **IG Metall**

Country: **Germany**

Text: **Léonie Guguen**

Photos: **IG Metall**

Why did you get involved in union activities?

The political mood when I joined IG Metall in 1971 was very conducive to trade unions and issues of democracy at the workplace. German chancellor Willy Brandt wanted to extend democracy and it was the time of the biggest approval rates for trade unions in Germany.

What have you learnt in your union career?

I learnt to listen to my colleagues. I learnt to find and define common objectives. I also learnt not to see myself as so important - it is unity that makes us strong.

In Germany, after the Second World War, we had the advantage of being able to rebuild a union movement based on the principle of one sector, one union - irrespective of racial, religious, or political background. One union that defends your interests in the sector that you work in.

So if you take my union, IG Metall, it is a strong stable union that has, after all the difficulties with reunification, remained strong.

Not long after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, you moved to the former German Democratic Republic as an officer for IG Metall. What role did unions play in unifying the country?

Two completely different worlds met - an extremely productive industry in the West merged with an economy that was lagging behind. But it's fair to say that IG Metall managed to get one million new members from the former Eastern states. Unfortunately, we lost many of them again, mainly due to massive job cuts and deindustrialization in former East Germany. Our main task in the beginning was to preserve as many jobs as possible.

Why are global unions like IndustriALL important?

Historically, trade unions in industrialized countries have had an international perspective and you can find this in all the important texts of the labour movement.

It is also why IndustriALL has its headquarters in Geneva, the home of the International Labour Organization, which has the mandate to regulate international standards at the global level.

Globalization has further reinforced the need to regulate labour standards internationally. There has always been an important strategic objective to create a counterbalance to global capital, as globalization plays workers off against each other. **We need to work together in unity.**

What has IndustriALL achieved in its inaugural four years?

The biggest achievement is that we have managed to come together across our sectoral borders – from extractive industries such as mining, all the way through the value chain to manufacturing, to form one united global union.

We have managed major successes in terms of agreements such as the Bangladesh Accord, even though it came out of a cruel tragedy three years ago. No single national union would have been able to achieve it and without IndustriALL and UNI Global Union it never would have been possible.

IndustriALL has also helped to put living wages and minimum working standards on the global agenda. 7 October, when our affiliates use the day to protest against precarious work, is a major achievement. In Germany it has become an important day where irrespective of what else is going on, we fight precarious jobs in Germany and across the world.

The five strategic goals that everyone supports and subscribes to are a huge achievement and I'm not aware of any other big organization that has done this.

IndustriALL's five strategic goals

- > Build union power
- > Defend workers' rights
- > Confront global capital
- > Fight precarious work
- > Achieve sustainable industrial policy

What challenges are unions facing?

Globalization has contributed to a situation where workers' rights are violated every day almost everywhere in the world. The right to strike, freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining must be valid to all workers everywhere, not just individual countries.

Precarious work is definitely one of the big challenges of the 21st century, whether in an industrialized or new economy. It has pervaded everywhere, although in different forms. The conflict between capital and labour over precarious and safe work is just the beginning. Youth unemployment and informal work are also major challenges.

We see the pressure building on unions, for example, in North America. The zones

where there is improvement in union building, such as in South East Asia, are also characterized by many company-based unions. There needs to be one voice on a national basis so unions work together.

After two bloody world wars in the last century, global peace is the most important issue. This can only be achieved by continuing to promote human rights, freedom, democracy, justice and growing prosperity for everyone everywhere in the world.

You were interim Chairman of Volkswagen and are currently deputy chairman of the supervisory board at Audi. With your experience in the car industry, how much of a threat is Industry 4.0?

When we talk about Industry 4.0 we talk about digitalization but a major challenge is the change from fossil fuels, which also adds to pressure on production and jobs. Electric engines require fewer parts and this will affect car-producing countries in Latin America, Asia, Europe and North America.

One thing is clear - manufacturing and producing cars will profoundly change but different countries will be affected differently. Some countries are also heavily involved in research and development and investment goods and producing robots. Germany is exposed in the car industry but also in the investment goods – in the mechanical and equipment industries.

If you want to influence this structural change in a positive way for workers you need strong trade unions. After all it's jobs that are at stake.

Firstly, it is a task for national labour unions to address. It is a national issue first before IndustriALL, which must fight for the overarching issues of fair wages, secure jobs and a safe place to work.

What are your views on a 40 per cent quota for women at IndustriALL?

I am unconditionally in favour of a quota for women's representation and I have fought for that at IG Metall. The biggest question is how to achieve it and what the sanctions will be if affiliates violate the quota? I'm in favour of changing the statutes, it's a political statement and commitment, but it is more important that it takes place in reality and not just in our documents. We need to talk about how we actually achieve better participation by women.

What are you hoping IndustriALL can achieve in the next four years?

The mere creation of IndustriALL is a success. The preparation for this took years, if not decades. We have managed to address issues across sectors and I have hardly been to a meeting or discussion where sectoral origins played an important role for participants. But we still need to develop our common culture further.

It is not enough to merely describe the evil of global capital. You have to be active. You have to challenge the companies and that is where the need for visible and effective campaigns comes into play and the need to further increase IndustriALL's visibility.



Beyond the five goals, we have to again translate this into concrete action and the activities we have in the regions, for example, with precarious work. Through a bigger focus on organizational development we have to build strong, united, democratic, independent, representative and self-sustaining trade unions throughout the world.

For this, the role of the regions and the regional work definitely needs to be strengthened. We can't do this and other tasks from Geneva.

The President is the voice of the affiliates. The President needs to have a strong voice and opinion, but the major task is to listen and create a common position and unity.



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