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**Conference report**

Yemisi Ilesanmi, Nigeria Labour Congress

Vienna, 4-6 November 2008

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## **Report from the 24<sup>th</sup> International Lesbian and Gay Association World Conference**

The 24th ILGA conference started on Monday 3 November with various pre-conference activities organised around different areas of concern. There was the women's pre-conference activity which was restricted to women only. It had different sessions on topics like ***Women and Bisexual Activisms: Ruptures to Alliances, Inclusiveness: Establishing bridges between movements, Lesbians in the Middle East and Cooperation with feminist groups etc.*** These sessions highlighted the importance of networking with feminists groups and other progressive organisations as allies of the lesbians and bisexual community. It also highlighted the difficulty of organising lesbians and bisexuals in the Middle East.

The World Social Forum was discussed as an almost safe place for LGBT participation although the last WSF in Nairobi was generally regarded by participants as very hostile to the LGBT community. ASWAT, the Palestinian gay women organisation lamented the triple oppression and struggle of gay women in Israel, first as an oppressed ethnic minority, secondly as a marginalised gender, and thirdly as a persecuted sexual identity. They call for global peace and politics with justice.

There was also a pre-conference activity for the Trans community. The major theme was build on ***Challenges of the trans and intersex community, complete inclusion in the LGBT movement , Strategic alliances to grow***. The various sessions around this theme highlighted the need to include and welcome the trans and intersex community in the LGBTI movement. It also discussed understanding the issue of gender identity as a major step towards acceptance.

There were also general workshops organised by member organisations ranging from presentation of a book to addressing Human rights in International institutions and UN advocacy. In the workshop for organising for LGBT Rights in the Commonwealth, Stebano speaking on behalf of Global rights said when engaging organisations around LGBT issues in the commonwealth, since there are different environment, this creates different engagement strategies. He also observed that there are political and institutional considerations, for example should UK be the

one to be holding the stick? Should it be foreign faces? Wouldn't it be seen as a political invasion? It was generally acknowledged that there is a sensitivity between Britain and its former colonies. However, some participants provided useful information on some activities of the British council and embassies in their respective countries. For example in Sri Lanka, the British Council is organising LGBT rights workshop amongst its staff. While in Asia the British embassy is bringing together organisations working on de-criminalization of sodomy laws as preparation towards the Commonwealth meeting in Trinidad and Tobago in 2009. It was also observed that within the commonwealth, there are indeed countries that have dropped their sodomy laws and the goal is to work towards ensuring that all countries abolish the sodomy laws.

There was a dinner reception organised by Vienna's Mayor, Micheal Haupl, at the City Hall. He warmly welcomed the participants to Vienna, a city he claimed is very open and welcoming to diverse groups.

The 24th ILGA conference was declared open on 4 November, 2008 by Rosanna Flamer – Caldera and Phillip Braun, Secretaries Generals of ILGA. It was addressed by Leo Steiner from IBM, Engelbert Theumann, Head of the Human Rights Directorate of the Austria Foreign Ministry, Maris on behalf of Michael Cashman MEP, and Paula Ettlbrick from ILGHRC.

A Chairing pool was approved by the participants. The chairing pool is to manage the conference in place of ILGA's Executive Board whose mandate partially terminates at the beginning of the conference. The following were approved as chairing pool members , Naomi Ruzindana from HOCA Rwanda, Charles Gueboguo Alternate from Cameroun, Kamila Manaf, IPP Indonesiam, Deborah Lambilotte, Halebifederatie Belgium , Kurt Krikler, Hosi Wien Austria and Maria Sjodin, RFSL Sweden.

The agenda for the conference was approved by participants. Also approved to preside as election officers were Michiel Oddijk and Rozelinks of the Netherlands. The procedure for the election was explained. During ILGA conferences, member organisations elect a male secretary general and a female secretary general. Also a member organisation will have to be chosen as the Trans secretariat and another as a women's secretariat. Members also have to elect alternates for those positions as well as the organisation which will host the next world conference in 2010.

Surendra Abeyunsundra Co-chair of ILGA Asia (SRI Lanka) presented an overview of the work of ILGA since the 23rd world conference in Geneva, 2006. Janfrans Van Den Eerden, European Board Member of ILGA tabled the need to comply with a new change in Belgian law. ILGA's office is presently located in Brussels and operates under Belgian law. A recent change in the law presented ILGA an opportunity to change from a National non profit organisation (asbl) to an international non profit organisation (aisbl).

There was also presentation of reports from the women's secretariat and the Trans secretariat, and also regional presentations. There was approval of new ILGA members which also confer on them the right to vote at this conference. Jackie Lewis of UNISON also clarified that it is not Unison as such that becomes a member of ILGA but the LGBT groups within Unison and same applies to the Canadian Trade Union LGBT group.

There was also presentation of nominated candidates for the vacant positions. The various candidates many of whom were unopposed accepted their nominations and made a short presentation, however Phillip Braun who was the outgoing male Secretary General and the only candidate for the position was uncoordinated in his acceptance speech, in fact many thought his speech was incoherent and hostile, which made the participants call for a reopening of nominations of candidates for that particular seat the next day.

The conference held a minute silence in memory of the family members of the board member of ANZAPI region who recently passed away. There was also a Roundtable on Asia.

The president of the Austrian Parliament Barbara Prammer organised a dinner reception at the Palaise Epstein for the conference participants.

The conference started on Wednesday 5th November by acknowledging the victory of Senator Barack Obama in the US presidential elections. This was followed by the approval of reports that were presented and discussed the previous day. The reports included financial reports, budget, Audited report, women and Trans secretariat reports etc.

The chairing pool asked the participants to close the conference as *asbl'* and reopen as *aisbl'*. This was approved by the conference and the formality of closing the former conference and reopening as *aisbl'* was adhered to with fresh approval of chairing pool and agenda for the new organisation.

A discussion took place on whether to reopen nomination for the various posts or not. The election officers were of the view that since the candidates were unopposed they should be deemed elected. There was a vote on the motion to reopen nominations. There were 99 in favour of reopening and 78 votes against reopening. And also majority were for reopening the candidacy for the post of male secretary general only. However, the election officers announced that they would stand down as they do not wish to take responsibility for further election process. Maxim of The Netherlands and Simone, Switzerland were selected by the chairing pool as their replacements and approved by the conference.

There was a general workshop on ***Feminism for All'*** with a presentation by Dawn Cavanah and Nadine Mouawad. Comrade Yemisi Ilesanmi from the Nigeria Labour Congress observed that the presentation was mainly focused on the needs of lesbians and gay men and occasionally on Transgender but never mentioned

bisexuals, she asked why the Bisexuals and other sexual identities are not warmly welcomed even amongst the LGBT Community? This sparked up debates and discussion around other sexual identities and their inclusion in the LGBTI community. The ILGA secretariat was mandated to make Bisexuals and other sexual identities more visible in ILGA. The Trans secretariat also presented a general workshop on ***Trans and Intersex issue: going beyond the LGBT'***.

The afternoon sessions were dedicated to workshops by member organisations. The trade union<sup>1</sup> workshop had the theme ***'Trade unionists together for LGBT equality'*** organised by Unison, Public Service International and Education International. Rebecca from Education International was the lead discussant while Nick Crook from Unison, was the chair of the session. Rebecca emphasised the need to make the workplace safe for all. She also emphasised the need to create spaces in the union for full mobilisation of union members and also to work as support group for LGBT groups. She also emphasised the need to set a standard policy for all. Comrade Yemisi also implored the international unions to work with their affiliates especially the African affiliates on the issue of LGBT rights, she observed that although it is a good thing that unions have non discriminatory policies at the international levels but it is the monitoring and implementation of these policies that affects and impacts on workers lives everywhere. She also emphasise on the need for international unions to network with affiliates in Africa to organise regional and local workshops on LGBT rights in the workplaces. Trade unionists present all agreed that LGBTI issues should be given priority in trade union policies.

There was also a session on LGBTI issues in Africa. Lack of data collection and also difficulty in assessing available resources and data, lack of funding, legal framework and non institutional developments were some of the problems the LGBTI communities in Africa are facing. It was suggested that regional bodies should act as support for local bodies and also identify sources for immediate funding and long term funding for legal and societal change.

There was a reception at Bruno Kreisky Forum including the GO Visible Award. Organised for the first time this year, the GO Visible award is initiated and donated by Ulrike Lunacek, member of parliament in Austria and co- spokesperson of the European Green Party. An award prize of 3,500euros will reward an LGBTI group that has had steady and regular activities over the last 1-2 years, had local/ regional/national/transnational impact in the media, has done creative and inspiring activities and has a strong focus on the empowerment of women. ASWAT won the

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<sup>1</sup> The unions that were there as unions were: UNISON (UK), CUPE (Canada), ver.di (Germany), CGIL and EI. UCU (UK) had been at ILGA-Europe and were present for the trade union workshop but not at the conference as a whole. Dutch and Belgian delegates active in the FGTB and Abvakaabo were there, but not as union delegates.

award and a prize of 2, 500 euros while the second and third runner ups had 500 euros respectively

Thursday 6th November was the last day of the conference, the day started with the adoption of the outstanding reports. The election results was announced and Renoto Sabaddina from Italy was elected as the new male Secretary General. He made his acceptance speech and paid tribute to Phillip Braun the outgoing Male SG, he asked for support and understanding for Phillip whose action was said to be due to physical and mental exhaustion. Phillip Braun though absent was elected as the male alternate, Gloria Careaga from Latin America was elected female Secretary General while Linda Baunman from Africa was made the female alternate SG. Brazil was elected has the host city of the next ILGA world conference.

There was a presentation on the forthcoming World Outgames in Copenhagen billed to take place on 27-29 July 2009. The message was presented by Michael Stesgaard. There is a planned special **workers out** plenary that would be facilitated by trade unions. Details of the event are at [www.copenhagen2009.org](http://www.copenhagen2009.org).

There was a call for constitutional change in the requirement of a male and female Secretary General, the Trans community felt this was not inclusive of the other gender identities and asked that a third post for SG for other gender identity be created. This generated debates and proposals, in the end a proposed rewording put up by Unison that says that at least one of the two Secretary Generals must identify as a woman and the other can identify as any gender identity was put to vote and supported by majority with the proviso that it should be perfected at the next conference.

The conference came to an end with the newly elected executive board calling for support and promising better networking and outreach within the LGBT communities.

**Yemisi Ilesanmi**

***Nigeria Labour Congress***

**Sponsored by the Trades Union Congress (TUC)**