

Working Globally to Bargain Better Locally

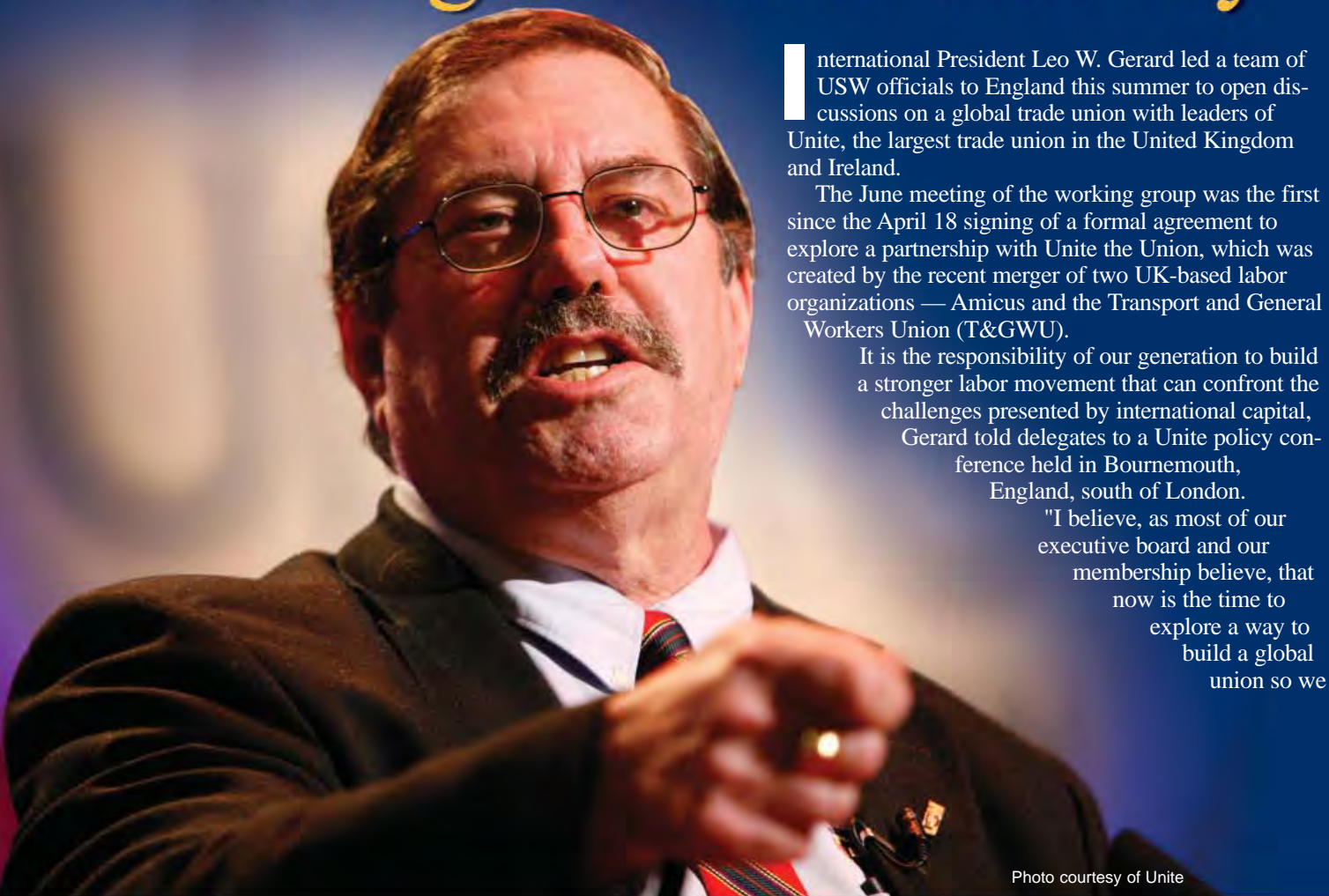


Photo courtesy of Unite

International President Leo W. Gerard led a team of USW officials to England this summer to open discussions on a global trade union with leaders of Unite, the largest trade union in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

The June meeting of the working group was the first since the April 18 signing of a formal agreement to explore a partnership with Unite the Union, which was created by the recent merger of two UK-based labor organizations — Amicus and the Transport and General Workers Union (T&GWU).

It is the responsibility of our generation to build a stronger labor movement that can confront the challenges presented by international capital,

Gerard told delegates to a Unite policy conference held in Bournemouth, England, south of London.

"I believe, as most of our executive board and our membership believe, that now is the time to explore a way to build a global union so we

can respond to global corporations," Gerard said in a passionate speech that drew a standing ovation from the conference.

Technical issues discussed

The parties discussed technical and procedural issues and established a working plan for future discussions, said Gerald Fernandez, who oversees international affairs and global bargaining operations for the USW.

Of note was an agreement to detail each union's top sectors and employers as a step toward creating working groups, or joint councils, to coordinate bargaining and apply leverage in support of each other in difficult bargaining.

Delegations for the two unions will next meet in October, Fernandez said. Talks on the possible merger will run parallel with the discussions on building bargaining and other leverage.

In addition, it was agreed that the unions will exchange rank-and-file delegations to cooperate on functional areas such as health and safety issues.

"Our meetings were very fruitful, including establishing working groups to look at the possibility of coordinated bargaining with common employers such as Timet," Gerard said in a *Message From Pittsburgh* to our members.

Solidarity is key

"We'll start talking to each other soon about areas where we can begin immediate cooperation such as health and safety," Gerard added. "This sort of solidarity is key to the USW better representing our members."

In his speech, Gerard touched on public and private health care, student

debt, private equity and corporate manslaughter in illustrating the common problems faced by union members around the world.

The 2005 explosion at a BP oil refinery in Texas City, Texas, that killed 15 workers and injured 180 illustrates the sectoral, company and issue links between Unite and the USW.

Some of those workers had been "evaporated" in the intense heat of the explosion, which had been caused in part by cost-cutting measures ordered by BP's British former boss, Lord Browne.

"This solidarity is key to the USW better representing our members."

Noting that Browne escaped sanctions, Gerard told the delegates that the United Kingdom needs its own version of the USW-backed Westray Bill in Canada, which makes corporations, their directors and executives criminally accountable for putting workers' lives at risk.

"We need that law in Britain just like we needed it in Canada so that people who behave like that with the health and safety of workers get punished the way they deserve to be punished and we're going to be proud to work with you to make that happen," he said to applause from the delegates.

Private equity firms

While the team was in Britain, the USW and Unite jointly called for government regulation of private equity firms that increasingly operate around the world and wield much economic influence.

The unions pledged to lobby national and regional governments in Europe and North America for legislation to bring transparency into the activities of private equity firms and close tax loopholes that reward short-term manipulation at the expense of sustainable jobs and income for workers.

The unions want greater powers and flexibility for member pension plan trustees to ensure more ethical investments.

"Private equity firms operate under a cloak of secrecy, often creating instability in the companies by loading them with debt, and treating working people as expendable commodities," said Derek Simpson, Unite joint general secretary.

The use by private equity firms of pension money against the interests of workers highlight the reason that we are exploring a merger with Unite, Gerard said.

"Global finance must be confronted by global labor," Gerard added. "Our members demand that the deferred wages of workers be used to create long-term viable companies and that workers receive a fair share of the wealth that they create."

The merger exploration process is expected to take a year. A merger committee made up of five principal individuals from each union, with support of technical staff, will meet regularly during that time.

If consummated, a merger would create the first trans-Atlantic labor union, representing more than 3 million workers and retirees in the United States, Canada, the Caribbean Basin, the United Kingdom and Ireland.

Steelworkers, CWA Sign Strategic Alliance in Canada

The United Steelworkers and the Canadian Region of the Communications Workers of America have signed a strategic alliance agreement to work together on issues of common interest in Canada and globally.

The agreement was signed in July during a two-day international convention of the CWA that was attended by more than 1,500 people at Toronto's Convention Centre.

Ken Neumann, USW national director for Canada, said the USW is proud to join forces with CWA members in Canada.

"Our union has a history of developing partnerships that are flexible and constructive with like-minded organizations throughout the world," said Neumann. "Through these closer

ties we are better able to work toward building justice and better working conditions for working people."

CWA Canadian Regional Director Arnold Amber said both unions are "progressive forces that fight in the political arena as well as collective bargaining" and are dedicated to protecting their members in Canada.

"Members of my union look forward to working closely with the USW," Amber said. "We have long been allies. Now our partnership is even stronger."

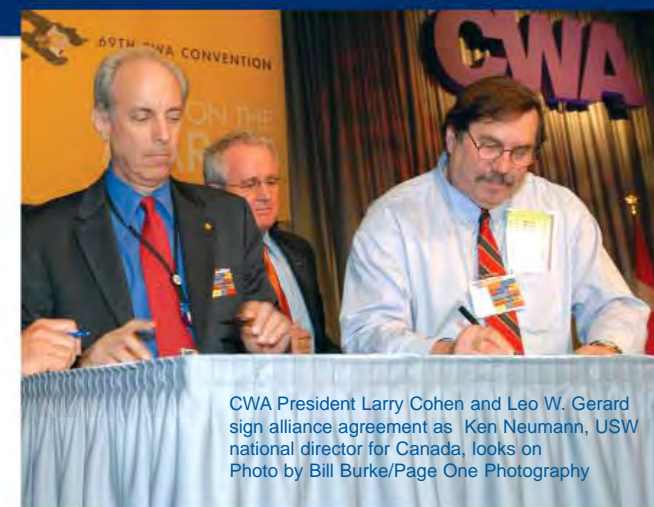
The unions will fully retain their autonomy and independence but commit to conducting joint activities in support of their members and their struggles. Initially, the alliance will

focus on joint public policy and legislative work but joint activities could include any other mutual objectives including education.

The presidents of the USW and CWA will appoint a coordinating committee consisting of their Canadian National Directors and other key elected officials and staff. The committee will operate by consensus.

The CWA/SCA Canada Region represents about 9,000 workers in Canadian media including newspapers, broadcasting, news agencies and the Internet. Other members are in social work, interpretation services and light industry.

The USW is the largest private sector union in both Canada and North America, with more than 280,000 members working in every economic sector in Canada, and 850,000 members continent-wide.



CWA President Larry Cohen and Leo W. Gerard sign alliance agreement as Ken Neumann, USW national director for Canada, looks on
Photo by Bill Burke/Page One Photography