

In a daring response to the growing power of global capital, the USW is taking steps to create a truly international trade union capable of representing workers around the world.

On April 18, the USW signed a formal agreement to explore a merger with Unite, a new creation of two merged British unions, Amicus and the Transport and General Workers Union (T&GWU).

The 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.

Global Solidarity

USW Takes First Steps to Create International Trade Union

Challenge multinationals

As the world's largest union, a merged USW and Unite is expected to attract other unions into membership with the aim of creating a single global trade union movement capable of challenging multinational corporations.

"The time for global unionism has arrived," said International President Leo W. Gerard, who signed the agreement with Amicus and T&GWU leaders during a USW National Policy Conference in Ottawa, Canada.

"We need cross-border organizing strategies to protect workers against the mobility of capital that knows no borders," Gerard added.

"Workers want their unions to develop labor contracts that encompass global employers. We must meet the challenge and defend human rights standards for all."

Ken Neumann, USW National Director of Canada, also signed the agreement as did Derek Simpson, general secretary of Amicus and Tony Woodley, general secretary of T&GWU.

"Someone has to take the first step," said Simpson, who noted that working people in different countries have common problems. He said the need for a global union was pressing.

Amicus and T&GWU

merged on May 1. Together as Unite, they represent an estimated 2.1 million workers and retirees. The USW represents 1.2 million active workers and retirees.

The USW already has alliances with mining and manufacturing unions around the world in which we share research, discuss common bargaining strategies and support one another during strikes.

Before it merged with T&GWU, Amicus had such agreements with the International Association of Machinists in the United States, as well as Germany's IG Metall labor union. The T&GWU also had close working relationships with other U.S. unions.

The merger talks come at a time when unions around the world are struggling to respond to globalization, which is pushing down wages and benefits for workers in many Western countries. At the same time, union density has been on a slow decline throughout much of the industrialized world.

"One of the main reasons for merging," Simpson said, "is the desire to create an international trade union that would be able to deal with multinational companies on an equal footing."

Resist by banding together

"Multinational companies are pushing down wages and conditions for workers the world over by playing one national work force off against another," he said. "The only beneficiaries of globalization are the exploiters of working people, and the only way working people can resist this is to band together."

The USW has a network of strategic alliances with foreign unions that date to the early 1990s. As metals, production became a global enterprise, the union formed alliances with mining and manufacturing unions in Brazil, South Africa,

Australia, Mexico, Germany and Britain.

In part, the alliances emerged because of shared common employers such as Alcan Inc. and Alcoa in metals, Bridgestone-Firestone in tires and, now, with the USW and Britain's Amicus having grown to include paper workers, Georgia Pacific and International Paper.

But the purpose of the proposed merger is broader.

"We determined that the best way to fight financial globalization was to fight it globally," said Gerald Fernandez, who oversees international affairs and global bargaining operations for the USW. "Exploring a merger is the necessary first step to building a global union or federation of metal, mining and general workers."

Combining the organizations will be complicated. As a result, the Ottawa agreement calls for an exploration committee to study legal, constitutional and structural issues and suggest a framework for the merger within one year.

At a news conference, the union leaders said it was too early in the process to discuss what will be the name or ultimate structure of the new organization.

"Don't ask me to tell you what the end is going to be the day we start the conversation," said Gerard, who promised the deliberations on those issues will be thoughtful and creative.

"This is not a corporate consolidation," he said. "We're coming to this as equals with a common vision ... There are going to be hurdles, but we are going to work on them."

Exploration committee

The unions will set up a committee of five principal individuals from each union to be supported by technical staff as needed. The committee will meet regularly over the next 12 months beginning in June.