

MILTON TERRIS

GLOBAL SOLIDARITY

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In 1987, 121 representatives of 94 health workers' organizations met in Moscow to discuss, and take action, on the grave threat to human survival resulting from the arms race and the danger of nuclear war. The 121 participants represented 53 health workers' trade unions, 12 public health associations, 13 professional organizations, 4 other national health organizations, and 12 international and regional organizations. There were 50 countries, 13 industrial-capitalist, 8 socialist and 29 developing. Of the 50 countries, 13 are in Africa, 9 are in Asia and the near East, 16 in Europe, 10 in Central and South America, and 2 in North America.

The participants unanimously adopted both a declaration and an action program. The declaration stated in part that "the arms race is the great enemy of humankind rather than our competing economic and social systems, our differing political views, our varied religious creeds". We went on to note that the arms race has resulted in severe cutbacks in health services, education, nutrition, indeed in every aspect of human services. Deadly diseases continue to destroy and maim our children, men and women, because safe water supplies and basic sanitation facilities are not available, because people have no access to medical services, because

they are hungry and undernourished, because they are poor and illiterate and know little of personal hygiene. Furthermore, we adopted positions on nuclear testing, reduction and elimination of nuclear weapons, and a total ban on chemical and bacteriological weapons. We then discussed disarmament and development, and we fully endorsed the UN General Assembly recommendation for a 10% reduction in the military budgets of the permanent members of the Security Council, and allotment of the 10% of the funds so released for assistance to the developing countries. We ended our declaration with the statement that dialogue and negotiation, not war, aggression, and destruction, is the human norm for conflict resolution among the nations of our single, indivisible, world community.

We then went on to develop, on the basis of this conference, a World Council of Health Worker Organizations for Social Well-being, Health and Peace, but we ran into two kinds of trouble. Some of the health-worker trade unions felt that perhaps we were trying to start another international trade union federation in competition with the two existing ones. We also encountered the objection that we ought not to be concerned with any issue other than nuclear war, that instead we health workers should continue to play a very small part of the original group through which we first met, the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War. Both of these, trade unionists and the physicians, objected strenuously to the formation of an independent organization of health workers. It took four years before we were able to become an independent organization concerned with social well-being and health as well as peace. In 1991, we adopted finally a constitution, and the current active members of our coordinating committee include: the American and the Canadian Public Health Associations; the Polish Society of Hygiene; national trade unions in Finland (Union of Health Professionals), France (Federation of Health and Social Action, CGT), Japan (Federation of Medical Workers Unions, IROREN), Nigeria (Medical and Health Workers Union), Spain (Public Service Federation, UGT, Health Workers Federation, CCOO), and the United Kingdom (Medical Practitioners Union, Health Visitors Association, and Community Psychiatric Workers Association); MSF; the former USSR (International Confederation of Health Workers Unions); and professional

organizations such as the Polish Nurses Organization, the Sudan Doctors Union, and the Federation of Associations for the Defence of Public Health in Spain.

What brought us together in 1987 was the threat of nuclear war. As we said in our declaration: "The arms race threatens all life on our planet; it must be stopped for the sake of human survival". What brings us together now, when the threat of nuclear war is not as urgent? Let me read the preamble to our constitution: "Health workers of all countries dedicate their lives to promoting health and well-being, preventing disease and injury, treating illness, preventing disability, and restoring individuals to maximum social function. They are profoundly aware of the environmental and social threats to health, not only bacteria and viruses, but hunger, unemployment, poor working and living conditions, toxic chemicals, accidents and violence, and above all, the threat of war and the nuclear annihilation of all human life. Health worker organizations, their trade unions, public health associations, and professional associations, represent millions of health workers and their families. They constitute a powerful force, working together - regardless of their varying social, political, philosophical and religious views - for social well-being, health and peace. It is the objective of the World Council to help promote such collaborative activity through communication, education, and advocacy among all the nations of our world."

What brings us together now is the current era of budget-cutting and privatization that began at the end of the 1970's, with the elections of Margaret Thatcher as prime minister of the United Kingdom in 1979, and Ronald Reagan as president of the United States in 1980. Both were pledged to the reduction of expenditures on public services, increasing privatization, and the shifting of the tax burden from the very rich to the working and middle classes of the population. Both carried out these policies with ruthless determination and considerable success, and their policies continue to be implemented by the Conservative government in the UK and the Republican administration and Democratic congress in the

US². In the United States, budgets for public health and medical care programs have been slashed unmercifully in the Reagan-Bush administrations, and user-charges have been raised sharply. The situation grows worse every day. In the UK, for example, the Conservative government has deliberately starved the National Health Service of cash and encouraged the shift to private hospitals. It now proposes to create a market within the NHS and make its services available to the private sector. These policies have been exported to the rest of the world through the work of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which have followed a consistent policy of demanding adherence to so-called austerity measures - austerity for the working and middle classes and prosperity for the rich and powerful - as an essential condition for receiving loans for their hard-pressed economies.

In the health sector, the World Bank published, in 1987, a book called 'Financing Health Services in Development Countries: an Agenda for Reform', which proposed "an agenda for reform that in virtually all countries ought to be carefully considered". This included four policies: charging users of government health facilities; providing insurance or other risk coverage; using non-governmental resources effectively; and decentralizing government health services. In other words, cut public budgets and privatize services. This is the Reagan-Thatcher strategy which is being applied worldwide, in the industrialized as well as the developing countries. This massive threat to the health of the people of the world, affecting not only health services, but education, housing, nutrition, and other social services which have such an important role in promoting health, was highlighted by the World Council of Health Worker Organization for Social Well-Being, Health and Peace in a resolution adopted at its meeting in England, in February 1989, entitled 'Government Reductions in Health Services and the Drive for Privatization'. The resolution stated that the Organization is deeply concerned by the worldwide trend toward reductions in government budgets for health services, and the drive towards privatization of the

² In 1992, following presidential elections, the present Democratic administration under President Clinton was elected. In 1994, a Republican congress was elected.

costs and ownership of these services. These regressive policies are being vigorously promoted by the International Monetary Fund as the means of reducing deficits and as a condition for receiving new loans. UNICEF's director, the late James P. Grant, stated to the New York Times on December 20, 1988 that: "Most societies, under the pressure of economic adversity, have cut back disproportionately on services in health, education, and social welfare programs."

What brings us together now is not only budget-cutting and privatization. These are simply part of the New World Order, which came into being with the Gulf War, and which represents the interests of a handful of superpowers - the Group of Seven - and a multiplicity of multinational corporations, and is diametrically opposed to the interests of the majority of people in all countries of the world. On January 30 and 31, 1991, our Coordinating Committee called for an immediate cease fire in the Gulf war, stating that "as health workers our goal is to devote our lives to the struggle against disease, misery and death. We have worked for years to reverse the priorities and policies of our governments so that they will provide the resources necessary for health and social well-being". And again in April 1991, our Coordinating Committee, in a resolution entitled "From the Gulf War to Peace Disarmament", stated, among other things, that "the invasion of the sovereignty of any nation by other nations, or by international forces, must be stopped. All existing regional military alliances, such as SEATO and NATO must, like the Warsaw Pact, be dissolved. There must be effective disarmament, and the shift of resources which are now wasted in arms production, to programs for social well-being, health and development, must become the first priority of humanity. The United Nations must never again be used to wage wars; this perversion of the purpose of the United Nations is totally indefensible. The UN must wage peace, not war. The governance of the UN must be democratized. The Security Council, dominated by the big powers with their veto rights and economic pressure, cannot be relied upon to protect the many small countries of the world. It is the General Assembly that represents all countries, and to exclude the Assembly from the crucial deliberations and decisions of the United Nations violates all principles of democracy."

The Concept of Health Under National Democratic Struggle

I have reported these actions by the World Council not to provide any illusion of strength, but to tell you where we stand. We welcome wholeheartedly the emergence of the International People's Health Council. We are proud and honored to participate in this most important conference. We stand with you in a common struggle for a better future for all humanity. We look forward to working closely with you to bring that future closer.