



**REPORT OF THE SECRETARY GENERAL
ILRS CONGRESS
30 June - 2 July 2006
Oslo, Norway**

Dear comrades, welcome to our congress. I think the best way to start my report to this congress is by saying thank you. Thank you to the delegates and guests for coming, and thanks to everyone who made this congress possible. We are so fortunate to have had the help of many Nordic organisations in planning this congress, and I want to thank each of them. The LO, who have made Sørmarka available to us; the Norwegian Labour Party, who have assisted us with details in bringing our guests to us; the Olof Palme International Center, who brought our guests to us, with the help of our Swedish member organisation Broderskap; and finally Kristne Arbeidere, who have worked so hard to bring everything together into a whole and make the congress a reality from start to finish. This truly was a team effort, and it demonstrates the kind of cooperation that one finds in the famous Nordic model, a model that others in the world admire so much. I also want to give special thanks to María Hevzy, who has given so much of her time, while at the same time having her hands full as the acting international secretary of the Norwegian Labour Party. We are all very grateful to her for her indispensable work in making this happen.

This congress is a defining congress for our organisation. More nations are represented this year than in any previous ILRS congress; seven of those from outside of Europe. Four faiths are represented here, not merely by presence, but by contributions of their believers to our theme. We have only just begun to expand our reach out into the world, but it is now quite clear that we have indeed begun.

This is also the first congress since we began what one might call the transformation of the ILRS to include ongoing political projects and campaigns which are active inbetween congresses. We began that work two and a half years ago in London, with an ambitious plan for action, our ILRS Work Plan. As you can see, most of the aspects of the Work Plan are themselves beginnings, works in progress that allow for each of our member organisations to expand upon them and use in whatever way we find useful. These projects will continue on to the next congress, and it is our hope that they will grow and develop further as our member organisations take them up, add their own input and share their experiences with all of us.

But at the same time we have to admit that some of the goals we set for ourselves have not been met. One example of that is our goal to bring five new member organisations into this Congress. We have no new member organisations coming into this Congress, but in a sense, not reaching all of our goals in the way we might like is actually helpful, because it gives some perspective to the plan in terms of what we can expect from ourselves when we start to do the work behind the words.

It is also important to remember that in 2003, when we brought three new members in to the ILRS, it was the result of six years of work. So while we do not have any new members coming into this congress, I want to report that you have seen here the very beginnings of what we can expect by 2009. It is quite possible, indeed probable that we shall bring in groups from the Philippines, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Costa Rica and Israel and Palestine. We have just received applications from Bangladesh, New Zealand, and Bhutan, the first predominately Buddhist nation to show an interest in the ILRS. Those applications are so new that they are not ready to be brought before the congress. We have also had basic inquiries from Romania, Ukraine, and Portugal.

And we also have some symbolic evidence of the progress we have made together since the last Congress.

Three years ago, the leader of our Spanish organisation was unable to be with us because of political events in the Basque Country. Today I am very happy to say that Carlos Garcia de Andoín is here with us in Oslo; he has not only overcome those difficulties, but has taken *Cristianos en el PSOE* to new heights in his party, receiving official recognition from the party leadership two years ago. Since 2003 the ILRS has been to Bilbao three times, most recently when our comrades there hosted a meeting of our Executive Committee.

Three years ago we had our first delegation from our new member organisation in the Dominican Republic, the *Frente Nacional de Cultos*. Today at this congress, we have with us the person who is responsible for bringing them into our organisation, Pedro Sanchez Rodriguez. Our president, Pär Axel Sahlberg, had the opportunity to visit with our Dominican comrades in 2004 and we are happy to have their delegation with us in Oslo.

Three years ago, we welcomed our South African member organisation to their first congress. Our involvement with them, including a most fascinating journey to Johannesburg, has been so positive over the past three years that we are today excited to invite Cedric Mayson into a deeper level of involvement within the ILRS.

With that, I will begin my report on our representations, our contacts, and our projects.

Socialist International Congress

Our first major event was the Socialist International Congress in São Paulo, Brazil, which was attended by P.A. Sahlberg as well as myself. We were able not only to draft language on women's rights which was included in the São Paulo declaration, but also to make some new contacts both for the ILRS as well as our member organisations.

We were involved in helping the delegation from Polisario (Western Sahara) advance their position in relation to a resolution on that conflict.

We met with the representative from the SPD (Germany) to discuss ways in which the relationship between our German organisation and their party might be improved.

I was able to meet with the Presidium of IUSY and Israeli Labour Party International Secretary Colette Avital to discuss the Geneva Accord.

I also met very briefly with Thabo Mbeki and the president of the ANC youth organisation.

Most significantly at this congress, perhaps, was a meeting with the delegation from the Akbayan party from the Philippines. This party is deeply inspired by the tradition of religious socialism. Ronaldo and Risa were delighted to learn of us, and have expressed a serious interest in affiliating to the ILRS. And now of course we see the fruit of that contact, because our friend and comrade Ronaldo Llamas is here with us at this congress.

SI Council, Madrid, Spain:

While coming to Madrid for the SI Council, Pär-Axel and I had one of our three meetings with our Spanish comrades. I have already told of the excellent relationship between *Cristianos en el PSOE* and the ILRS, but at the SI Council meeting we were able to invite Carlos and Ricardo to be a part of the ILRS delegation. More importantly, some days before, I had a chance, with members of our organisation from Madrid, to meet with leaders of the Spanish Party. And some days before that, I had an excellent meeting with the leader of the Socialist Party in the Basque Country, Patxi Lopez. I really can't say enough about the hard work of our comrades in Spain. They have done a particularly fine job of organising in the past three years, and it will be exciting to see what they have been able to do in the next three.

Broderskap Congress, Bommersvik, Sweden:

I attended the 75th Anniversary Celebration of our Swedish organisation, where there was also an opportunity for comrades and ILRS-EC members from Nordic countries to meet and discuss international issues. An important part of our discussions was centred on — no surprise here — globalisation and how we as religious socialists shall address the future of globalisation. The Swedish organisation continues to be very inspiring and very involved in almost every area of political life. Attending their conferences is a highly informative experience for any religious socialist, and I would encourage anyone to experience a Broderskap conference at least once. If you can learn Swedish.

Labour Party Conference, Brighton, England:

Attending the Labour Party conference in Brighton was most rewarding, because of the exciting new developments taking place not only in CSM, but in new groups of Jewish and Muslim socialists who all finding ways to work together. After meeting up with the CSM delegation, we all attended a meeting held by a joint group of Jewish and Muslim activists who had decided to just start working together on their own to overcome the misperceptions and prejudices between their respective communities. The possibilities that a joint effort between religious socialists of different faiths could bring to our movement in Britain are most encouraging. Taking this further, I had an opportunity to attend many meetings and events where Britain's growing cultural diversity was addressed. ILRS Vice-President Bev Thomas and I also met with Stephen Timms MP and Marlene Haas, the Secretary General of Socialist International Women.

SI Council, Johannesburg, South Africa:

Our visit to South Africa was quite possibly the highlight of 2004. Our comrade Cedric Mayson joined the ILRS delegation of Pär-Axel and myself, and we were able to make an intervention before the Council, which addressed the issue of values and religious influences on society. Pär-Axel was well received, and the statement we drafted was distributed to the delegates. We met with the Secretary-General of the ANC, Kgalema Motlanthe, and our comrade Iqbal Jhazbay arranged for us to meet with a longtime Muslim socialist activist, and to appear on his Islamic radio station for an interview. In many ways, the South African experience is an example of the kind of world we should like to build. In one square kilometre of Johannesburg, we were shown a Catholic and Protestant church, a mosque, a synagogue, and a Hindu temple. The government is actively promoting tolerance between faiths and cultures, and despite the troubles that the nation may be having in other areas, we have a lot we can learn from South Africa in terms of their struggle and how to respect diversity in our world. I look forward to much more input from our South African comrades as we build the future of the ILRS.

Cristianos en el PSOE, Bilbao, Euskadi, Spain:

Again we returned to the Basque Country in November of 2004 — I told you they were busy — Pär-Axel and I were invited to attend the 10th anniversary celebration of Cristianos en el PSOE in November, which was a significant event in the history of the organisation. At this celebration, the organisation at last received the formal recognition from the PSOE it had sought for those ten years, and its leader Carlos Garcia de Andoin was appointed by PSOE Secretary Jose Blanco to pursue the creation of branches of the organisation throughout the country. I also met with the pastor of Bilbao's small Protestant community, as well as with many other wonderful comrades there.

SI Council, Tel Aviv, Israel/Ramallah, Palestine:

Pär Axel and I attended this rather special meeting of the Socialist International Council, which was held both in Tel Aviv and Ramallah. In the Tel Aviv portion, we met briefly with Yossi Ben-Bassat, former international secretary of the Meretz party, who expressed interest in working to form a religious socialist group in Israel which could include people of all faiths and across party lines. In Ramallah the agenda was so busy that we were not really able to make new contacts, but both of us had important meetings after the Council meeting was finished. While Pär Axel met with Palestinian contacts in Jerusalem, I was able to take meetings on the Israeli side further as well. I met with one of the leading rabbis in the Progressive movement of Judaism in Israel, Meir Azari, who has been actively involved in Meretz. He was happy to learn of an organisation like ours, and as a result of our meeting I think there are genuine possibilities to not only build a religious socialist group in the region, but also to build a relationship that would allow the ILRS to become more significantly involved in the peace process by means of joint conferences in the region. Rabbi Azari also mentioned the possibility

of holding a conference on religious socialism and the peace process in Jaffa. Our hope is that relationships can be built that will eventually lead to the first religious socialist organisation in the Middle East.

SAP Congress, Malmö, Sweden:

At the Swedish Social Democratic Party Congress in Malmö I met with Peter Weiderud, the president of Broderskap, as well as Samuel Stengård who is not here with us, but who was so helpful in helping to organise our Congress, so I want to thank him personally as well, along with Olle Burell of the Olof Palme International Center. The visit to Sweden also allowed me to meet briefly with our past president Evert Svensson and do some work together with Pär Axel in preparation for the Congress.

SI Council, Athens Greece:

The Athens meeting of the Socialist International Council was the last representation before the Congress, in January of this year. I met briefly with the South African delegation to discuss the participation of the ANC in our congress, as well as Fausto Liz, the international secretary of our Dominican sister party, and Ann Linde, international secretary of the Swedish party. Much of the meeting was occupied by the election of and greetings to the new president of the SI, George Papandreou, from Greece's PASOK party.

There are five contacts on which I wish to report; four of them were planning to be here in Oslo, two of them came very close to doing so, but then scheduling conflicts interfered.

Argentina:

Our contact with Argentina is very new but enthusiastic. Alejandro Zarate is the secretary of the youth organisation of the relatively new party ARI (Afirmación por una República Igualitaria), and he has already asked specific questions about forming a religious socialist group there and affiliating with the ILRS. The leader of this party, Elisa Carrió, is an openly religious person, and the party (a breakaway from the historical Union Civica Radical) is now the largest socialist party in the Argentinian parliament.

Brazil:

In Brazil we have made an important contact in the PT with Geter Borges, who is also a member of the Executive Committee of the Progressive Evangelical Movement. Geter is working on a Brazilian perspective on our theme of Social Globalisation, and we have been invited to a meeting that is now being organised in Brazil for the later part of this year. Our feeling is that we can definitely make progress with this contact, and we shall do all we can to bring them closer to us in the next three years. The language barrier is significant, and we have been using computer translations to communicate from English to Portuguese and back again, but we are making the effort in the confidence that that will be overcome, and with the knowledge that Brazil is an extremely important nation to bring into our family.

Canada:

On the table you will find the speech from Bill Blaikie MP, and that is the one he intended to give here. I first spoke to Bill Blaikie in 2001, at a New Democratic Party conference in Montréal. Bill is the longest serving member of the Canadian Parliament, and a minister in the United Church of Christ. He has a definite interest in the ILRS, and while the party in Canada was founded and led for years by ministers, it is unusual that Canada has not yet developed a religious socialist organisation within the party. I have pledged to work with Bill and help him in any way I can to build such an organisation, using both the influence of the ILRS as well as that of the American organisation to assist any effort that might be possible.

Israel and Palestine:

Our Israeli contacts were unable to make the Congress because of a prior commitment, but the possibility to involve Israelis and Palestinians in this organisation is very encouraging for obvious reasons. This conflict is of special significance to religious socialists, and it is important that we do what we can to bring healing and support to both sides in the conflict. Much of the work we have to do to make that happen will have to be done there, but we can at least hope that by the time of our next congress, we will be talking to Israelis and Palestinians face to face instead of talking about them.

Philippines:

At this point I think Ronaldo's excellent contribution to the Congress yesterday says more than I can about our hope for deepening the relationship between the ILRS and Akbayan. I look forward to working with him to bring a Filipino member organisation into our family by the next Congress. God willing.

As you can see, we have put a lot of focus on outreach, and we will continue to do so. But in the next three years, it is also my intention to put a strong focus on what we might call inreach, to strengthen the relationship between the ILRS and our member organisations. Just as with personal relationships, e-mail and telephone calls can only go so far. We have heard of two or three of our member organisations asking themselves what is the purpose of the ILRS and what does it do for them. My goal is to address those questions directly, and listen to the thoughts and concerns of our members so that we can strengthen the bonds between us.

To talk about our projects is to talk about our Work Plan, which as I said before is a new idea for the ILRS, that is, to have a way to continue our political work with our member organisations and others outside of our family in between the Congresses. That helps to define who we are and what we do to those who ask us, and also provides an opportunity for our member organisations to increase their own level of activity in international work. We have brought the results of our initial reports to this Congress, and we hope that through the workshops you were part of yesterday, and through your ongoing involvement with us, that we will be able to turn these reports and these ideas into living ideas that bring practical, measurable and useful results for us all.

So now I have told you of some things that we feel are somewhat new for us, but then in another way they are not so new. Because these things were inspired by the same vision that Evert Svensson has always had for our organisation; a vision that Harry Watson shared with him, a vision that we now try to make a reality.

In some ways, we are asking a lot of our member organisations. But in other ways, we are really asking all of us to understand that the world we live in will change whether or not we agree with that change. The ILRS is changing, and by the time of the next congress the door we have opened to others from other continents and other faiths will likely be transformed from a welcome into a relationship, with equal partners who bring different voices and different needs, both politically and spiritually.

Now more than at any previous time in history, a well-organised, politically skilled, and globally minded religious left is needed, one that is radically progressive not only in its view of how the world's economy and society should be transformed, but also in how our faiths will be understood and communicated.

It is easy to become cynical when working in politics. You see things you don't want to see, learn things you would rather not know; our parties sometimes make compromises we wish they would not make.

But when you come together with others as we have done here, with our ideas, our music, our culture and our different but similar histories, you see that in the same way that we, through our faiths, transform the spirit, as socialists we are a part of this beautiful movement to change life. To transform the world, into a place where peace and justice reign, a place where a working person has the rights they should expect from a decent society, in a democracy that extends not only to the ballot box every few years, but also to our daily lives, and to local and global economy. As religious socialists, we want to build the kind of society that is written about in many religious writings; a world without want, where there is no more hunger, no more poverty, justice for the worker and true solidarity between all and everyone.

*Submitted on 1 July 2006
Andrew Hammer
Secretary General*