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News

ILR Co-hosts Historical International Labor Event

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"Union Members Convene in NYC"

Over 500 union activists and academics from 55 countries gathered in New York City for the first ever Global Unions Conference last weekend. Prof. Kate Bronfenbrenner, the director of the Labor Education Research Program, described

the conference as a "historical event."

"That many unions, that many people, this has never happened before," said Bronfenbrenner. The "Strategic Corporate Research Presentations on Target Companies" were a major part of the conference. These talks were designed for unions to share and learn information and techniques for dealing with specific companies.

Bronfenbrenner described the process as "people thinking of strategies to shift the corporate labor balance."

Although there was no official response by any of the companies analyzed in the conference, employees of Exxon-Mobil from Cameroon, Bangladesh and Nigeria all had



problems obtaining visas to attend the conference, according to Bronfenbrenner. Luckily, the Cornell administration got involved, spoke to the U.S. State Department, and the unionists were able to attend.

However, French activist Jose Bove denied entry into the country. Opposed to free trade, globalization and fast food, he is known for disassembling a McDonald's under construction in France.

"[Bove'93; had a record of criminal convictions and therefore was not eligible for the visa-waiver program that allows visitors from many European countries to enter the United States using only their passports," said a government official speaking to the New York Times. However, Bronfenbrenner fears that Bove not allowed to speak because "the United States government [is] under the influence of agri-business."

Pat Young '06 and Bronfenbrenner both felt that one of the most moving presentations was by Hsu-Chung Chang, the president of the Chunghwa Telecom Workers Association. This union was responsible for Taiwan's first successful strike, as 28,000 workers protested the privatization of their state-run company.

Bronfenbrenner said that a video showing "the workers singing 'Solidarity Forever' in Mandarin" and "the police attacking workers in bright yellow and pink uniforms" was played at the conference.



With representatives from every continent besides Antarctica, and members of every religious group, Bronfenbrenner described the conference as a "mini-UN." Just like the real UN, at the main

presentations, those listening could put on an earpiece and hear a translation of the speaker.

People could listen to speakers at the conference in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian or Mandarin, and some of the 18 Cornell students present served as translators.

The international nature of this conference could have led to problems, as American unions are generally anti-communist, and a member of an international union "said that he was a communist from the podium," Young told The Sun.

"There were no international tensions," Bronfenbrenner said.

There still could have even been problems within the American delegation, due to its much-publicized division. On



the first day, Harris L. Raynor of UNITE HERE sat next to Richard Trumka of the AFL-CIO and said that managers were excited about the split in the American labor movement, but in reality, "If he's [Trumka] in trouble, I've got his back, and I know that if I'm in trouble he's got mine."

Young described this moment as "basically the theme of the entire conference, everyone was coming together."

The summit was held at the Crowne Plaza on Broadway, a unionized hotel. Participants attended a series of workshops and presentations over Thursday, Friday and Saturday, ending right before the biggest snowstorm ever to hit New York City. Many were stranded, and the reactions reflected the diversity of the participants. Some, such as those from Malaysia and Brazil, had never seen snow before and were without winter coats. But others, such as those from Siberia and Denmark, were unfazed by the 27 inches of snow that fell.

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