Remarks by President Tarja Halonen  
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Dear Comrades, Trade Union Activists, Sisters and Brothers,

I am very happy to be here in South Africa and to have this opportunity to address your Congress. As some of you might know, I was a lawyer with the Central Organization of Finnish Trade Unions for almost 10 years before being elected to parliament in 1979. In fact I was the first female trade union lawyer in Finland.

The political labor movement and the trade unions are like sisters. In most part of the world they were born around the same time from the same roots. They share the same values and they work closely together, but they have independent lives. Their birth and consequent efforts to fight for justice and equality has been a struggle, but one may say that we have been fairly successful.

However, our work is not done. Some old challenges persist and progress is uneven across countries and regions. Today's globalized world has also brought new challenges. Inequality is on the rise. Urbanization, unemployment, gender disparities, climate change and environmental degradation – just to name a few issues – shake the foundations of our societies and hinder sustainable development.

The past few years have been economically and politically difficult in many ways. The structural changes in work life, employment, livelihoods and business have evolved fast. Working life is getting more split than ever. Poor working conditions, raise to the bottom, zero contracts, the increasing differentiation of income and the uneven distribution of the fruits of growth affect the welfare of our societies everywhere. As the companies and supply chains are more global than ever, so must the political labor movement and the trade unions be more global and vocal and effective.
Crisis awareness, new solutions and action is needed. However, too often the answers offered would scale back the progress that the labor movement has achieved. Increased flexibility, improving competitiveness and structural reforms have been used as excuses and justification. There are new political forces that form governments that try to restrict union movement. For ordinary people and workers these policies mean lower wages, inferior benefits, unhealthy competition between employees and the burden of carrying entrepreneurial risks.

Let me mention one worrying recent example from the ILO. The employer representatives in 2012 suddenly questioned the long established and agreed right to strike. This is a very regressive development and hurts workers particularly in developing countries where national legislation often does not guarantee the right to strike. Change is natural and needed, but the correct answer is definitely not by worsening the conditions of employment or scaling back on progress.

On the contrary, as we are in the process of formulating the new Sustainable Development Agenda for the future, also the ILO core labor conventions need to be increasingly respected and ratified worldwide. They have been adopted in a tripartite manner and importantly, their application is also been supervised by ILO supervisory mechanism which is unique in the whole world.

I am so sorry to say, but it is not self-evident that trade union rights and core labor standards are implemented and respected. The rights and standards are crucially important, including the self evident freedom of association with the right to strike and right to negotiate collectively. Political parties that are interested in protecting workers’ rights should join trade unions in this important issue. The fight has to continue.

Sisters and Brothers,
Some claim that the labor movement is a thing of the past. They are simply wrong. I want to highlight some of the issues on the Sustainable Development Agenda, which are in the core of our aspirations and work. It is also clear that our involvement and contribution to the Agenda and its eventual implementation is highly relevant and needed.

I tend to see sustainable development as a "modern trinity". It is an integrated whole. Economic growth is welcomed and needed, but it has to respect the planetary boundaries. The social aspect is equally important, because if we do not build more equal and fair societies the future will not be economically or environmentally sustainable – nor will our societies be just.

Thanks to scientists, we are nowadays very aware of the situation and the consequences of our actions. We have already seen terrible changes with the climate and noticed that our planet's many important natural resources are being overused. Ecological diversity is diminishing. We know how political unrest develops in unequal societies. And we have statistics to show that inequality is bad economics. It is evident that sustainable development needs to be achieved in all human activity and across all the dimensions of development – the environmental, economic and social.

The international community has a real window of opportunity now as it plans and decides on the post-2015 agenda. It is a difficult task given the many and multifaceted development challenges the world faces. With multiple issues on the table at once, there is sometimes a sense of ‘competing priorities’. But in fact, tackling inter-related challenges holistically is precisely what we need to do to make meaningful progress. The global community has the opportunity to do things differently, and better, when the new development agenda is defined.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
People centered sustainable economies need empowered people. Democratic governance, accountability, rule of law and full respect for human rights are key prerequisites for empowering people to make sustainable choices.

Sustainable economies need "people centered growth" that maximize the use of human potential and resources by enabling all women and men to participate in economic life, to contribute to it through decent work, and to benefit from it through a living wage, reliable social protection and essential services.

Reduction of inequalities must become the central objective of everything we do. Our economic and social policies need to be inclusive. They need to promote the equal and meaningful participation of all. This is fair to the individual and a smart investment by the society. Securing everyone’s access to social protection is probably the most effective strategy a government can take to reduce inequalities. By reducing inequalities we are going to succeed in reducing poverty, too. But not the other way round.

Education, not only primary, but also secondary and vocational, is necessary for ensuring that everybody can contribute to addressing today’s challenges and seize opportunities. I always say to young people that you probably think your parents’ and grandparents’ education is out-of-date, but the same will apply to your education even faster. So please be prepared to enjoy life-long learning.

The underutilized potential of especially women and youth needs to be put in service. Creating employment opportunities, decent and green jobs for all would considerably help to drive sustainable growth. Not all jobs are green and not all green jobs are decent.

Women are confronted with numerous obstacles that limit their capacity as citizens, producers and leaders. In economy, unleashing women’s capacity, talent and innovation has the potential to yield great benefits. Studies show that closing the gap between male and female employment rates would boost
GDP by 9 to 16 per cent in OECD countries. And even if I do not believe that GDP is the goal, it does have some importance.

I heard that the Women's Conference held here last week was a success. Gender discrimination is a vice that we cannot accept or afford. Since Rio+20 I have been working with sexual and reproductive health and rights as the co-chair of the High Level Task Force for ICPD. In that work it has become evident also from a sustainable development perspective that if people cannot decide for themselves on their most intimate matters, be it whom and when to marry, or how many children to have, or what one's sexual identity is — how can we expect them to take care and feel responsible for their communities and the environment.

I want to briefly revisit the Millennium Development Goals. I remember when I was chairing the Millennium Summit with the President of Namibia. The feeling, or the atmosphere, was that the next millennium has to be better than the previous one. This millennium has not been so rosy, but we have not failed totally. I think that the Millennium Goals have helped us progress much more than we could have done without them. Now our experience can help us in drafting the Sustainable Development Goals. We can learn from our mistakes and make the SDGs stronger and better, and reflect what is required today.

Comrades,

We need vision and leadership in our work for better working conditions and a more just and equal sustainable world. But vision and leadership is not just a top-down process. They are needed at all levels in political movements, trade unions, civil society and business life. People need to be encouraged and educated to get involved. Sustainable development — with labor rights and decent work being its vital components — is fundamentally about people's opportunities to influence their own life and future, claim their rights and voice their concerns.

The labor movement has been looking for strenght from “organizing”, as we have heard here. Fundamentally “organizing” is about increasing democracy
at work places and businesses, but it is also about increasing the democratic power of workers more broadly in society. Organizing is based on the idea of decentralized action. That union members are the driving force in advancing their own concerns. It is about learning, insight and doing. Organized labour needs both active members and good membership services. At the end of the day, unions as well as political parties are for the people by the people.

Trade unions need the political movement and vise versa. This has been the case since trade unions and workers’ movement joined forces in the very beginning of the industrialization. The movements’ mission has been to provide a channel to build and strengthen a social model that people believe in. By working together, we can be strong.

I thank you all for the wonderful atmosphere at this Conference. And I thank all of you Comrades and the new UNI Global leadership for being active and dedicated to making this world a better place for us and for future generations to come. I hope you will leave Cape Town energized and with new ideas.

I wish you all the success