THE HISTORY OF THE INTERNATIONAL WORKERS’ SPORT MOVEMENT

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Mesdames et Messiers, Ladies and Gentlemen, meine sehr verehrten Damen und Herren, dear friends of sport!

From the perspective of a human individual hundred years are longer than a lifetime. We are all aware of the immense economic, social, political and technological changes our world has experienced since 1913 when the international workers’ sport movement was established. However, instead of breaks and changes, as a historian I have tried to find out, if it is possible to find certain continuities which could explain the sustainability of the international workers’ sport movement over a century. In my article about the history of the international workers’ sport movement I have summarized the continuities as nine elementary values which I have lasted since 1913 as the cornerstones of the movement. Let me shortly demonstrate these values by some historical examples, showing how the international workers’ sport movement has been challenged to follow these values in different historical times and circumstances.

1. Peace
Promoting world peace by bringing people(s) together
Resisting violence in sport itself and among the fans and spectators

2. Democracy
Co-operation with all democratic organisations
Promoting the democratisation and democratic alternatives of national and international sport organisations

3. Education
Promoting balance between body and mind.

4. Amateurism
Promoting the original ideas of sport – joy, play and fair play
Making a clear difference between professional sports and genuine sport
Identifying professional sports as business and profession which no longer belongs to genuine sport
5. **Equality**
Creating equal chances to exercise sport notwithstanding of one’s wealth, sex, age, race or religion

6. **Solidarity**
Helping the underdeveloped countries to build a proper sport system
Opposing the use of child labour in sport industries
Listening to the needs of minorities

7. **Honesty**
Promoting Fair Play
Opposing doping and other misuses of sport
Promoting openness in sport political decision making

8. **Health**
Promoting SPORT FOR ALL
Opposing doping and other misuses of sport

9. **Environment**
Promoting issues for the protection of nature
Organising sports activities, which promote the relationship of Man and Nature and better understanding of Nature

Some of these values have remained unchanged; some others have absorbed new contents in changed social circumstances but, however, it is remarkable how much the value basis of the workers’ sport movement has preserved from its originality.

**Promoting peace**

Promoting world peace and international solidarity was from the beginning one of the backbones of the labor sport ideology. Therefore it was quite natural that the national workers sport unions wanted to establish international contacts and partnership as early as possible. The first meeting for organizing international labor sport was held in Gent, Belgium on May 10, 1913. The initiative was taken by Gaston Bridoux from Belgium and Charles Saint-Venant from France.

The Gent meeting was supported by the bureau of the Socialist International (The Second International) which was at that time located to Brussels. The participants of the Gent meeting decided to establish a joint
organisation, named *Association Socialiste Internationale d’Education Physique* ASIEP.

The ASIEP understood itself as a help organisation of the Socialist International on the field of physical education. Organising international workers sport exchange would promote to achieve the revolutionary aims of the socialist workers movement. The First World War broke out in August 1914 and crushed the cooperation of the workers sport movement for five years.

As soon as the War was over two Belgian workers sport activists, *Gaston Bridoux* and *Jules Devlieger*, called French and English labour sportsmen to a meeting which was held in August 1919 in Seraing sur Meuse in Belgium. As well known the IOC banned Germany and Austria and did not invite them to participate to the Olympics in Antwerp 1920, and Germany not even to the Olympics in Paris 1924. The labour sport leaders, too, in their meeting in Seraing decided to boycott Germany and Austria. However, they enquired the opinions from other countries by sending a letter to national unions. The TUL from Finland answered that it would be unjust to accuse German and Austrian workers for starting the war. This simple but a very clever argument helped the workers’ sport movement to unite from the beginning.

The international cooperation was re-established in a meeting in Lucerne, Switzerland on September 14th 1920, the *International Association for Sport and Physical Culture* (the so-called Lucerne Sport International, LSI). In 1928 the name of the organization was changed to Socialist Workers Sport International, best known as SASI according to the German abbreviation of the name Sozialistische Arbeiter-Sport-International.

Since the aims of the working class sports movement were complementary to the goals of the international working class movement, it is clear that the efforts of the international workers sport movement, too, were antithetical to those of the Olympic movement and international special unions of sport.

The international workers sport movement remained isolated from the Olympic movement (IOC). In order to retain the cultural integrity of the workers sport the LSI/SASI established an Olympic movement of its own which organised three summer and three winter games in six years’ interval.
• 1925 Frankfurt/Main, Germany  Schreiberhau, Germany
• 1931 Vienna, Austria  Mürzzuschlag, Austria
• 1937 Antwerp, Belgium  Johannisbad, Czechoslovakia

Along with competitive athletics, these games placed great emphasis on mass performances and cultural events. An effort was made to turn physical exercise – as the German labour sport leader Fritz Wildung emphasised – into the working class’s new international language, which would be capable of breaking down all language barriers and increasing the international solidarity of the working class.

**Cooperation with all democratic organisations – in defence for democracy**

Since the second half of the 1920’s vehement political disagreements and power struggles between Social Democrats and Communists weakened the labour sports movement seriously. Because of these disputes the LSI/SASI started to strive to closer political cooperation with the Socialist Workers International, while in the beginning of the 1920’s its relationship to the Social Democratic movement had been quite loose and more or less only an affirmation to common ideological aims of the international socialist movement. By the year 1931 the LSI/SASI reached its largest number of membership. The national labour sport unions which belonged to the International counted ca. 1.8 Million members but 1.2 Million of them were from Germany alone.

When the worldwide depression broke out in 1929 and caused an unemployment which grew into millions the international workers sport movement was weak and split. The seizure of power by the National Socialists in Germany in January 1933 was fateful to workers’ sport – and not only in Germany. By the end of the 1930’s the international workers’ sport movement and almost all national unions were destroyed.

With the demise of its strongest member unions of Germany and Austria the LSI/SASI continued international co-operation even after 1933. Since 1934, on the basis of tactical changes of the Comintern to the so called people’s front policy, the Red Sport International offered cooperation to the LSI/SASI. An important facet of their common activities was the criticism of the 1936 Berlin Olympics for their unscrupulous use of sports in the service of Nazi propaganda. On the basis of the cooperation a strong Soviet team participated to the third Workers’ Olympic Games in Antwerp 1937.
The Second World War meant for the workers sports movement the begin of a new epoch: a shift was made from uncompromising isolation from bourgeois sport organisation to joint activities, a policy which has been carried out in different countries either in nation-wide unions or by separate agreements. This turning point was ultimately sealed and approved when workers sports were virtually driven to the brink of destruction under the heel of Fascism. On the other hand, the struggle against Fascism and the result of the Second World War promoted the international integration of the sports movement.

After the Second World War the International had to be re-established again. In a meeting, held in Brussels on May 30, 1946, the Comité Sportif International du Travail, CSIT, was founded. Since 2011 the official name of the organisation is Confédération Sportive Internationale Travailliste et Amateur – International Workers and Amateurs in Sport Confederation.

Although the leaders of the international workers sport movement had desired a unification of all national unions, Social Democratic as well as Communist, the Soviet Union no longer felt it wise to confine itself to the workers sporting arena. Its participation would in practice have been absolutely necessary for a forming a united International. The absence of the Soviet Union was politically a hard piece especially to the Communist members of the TUL and the FSGT of France.

In a world ideologically divided into two blocs, during the Cold War, the CSIT unmistakably spoke for the West and Western Democracy. In the shadow of the Cold War, in the wake of the Soviet Union, the so called people’s democracies of Eastern Europe were obliged to strange from the international workers sport movement which caused great disappointment in the West. Poland, however, took part in the International for as long as it could; indeed, the 1947 CSIT Congress was held in Warsaw. Although the communist athletes of France, Italy and Finland, for example, formed an exception; the most important members of the CSIT were Western Social Democrats. So the CSIT had to play a less significant role than its founders had hoped. Ideological schism prevented it from entering into dialogue with Eastern Europe. In fact, the Cold War hindered the CSIT to grow to a worldwide organisation. In 1963 the number of its member unions was not higher than 14.

Although the CSIT may have been a prisoner of the Cold War, since the mid-1980s the political climate began to change. Already in 1984 a delegation of the Soviet trade union sport organisation *Profsport* attended the CSIT Congress in Finland in Tampere, and since 1990 the *Syndicate*
Sport of Russia is a full member. From 1987 to the present the amount of the member unions of the CSIT has increased from 16 to 35. Most of the new members were from former communist countries, but many African unions have joined as well. While the old LSI/SASI as well as the CSIT until the 1980’s was predominantly a European movement, a quarter of the member unions of the modern CSIT are representing other continents.

By far the greatest challenge confronting the CSIT since the collapse of the Communist rule has been helping the countries in Eastern Europe when they commence to build new sport networks to replace the old communist machinery. Whilst the East European nations were extremely successful in the world’s competitive arenas, they in reality, despite their propaganda, neglected the exercise of masses. In practice, sports clubs were usually controlled from above, e.g. by the army or other governmental institutions, big state owned factories, universities etc. Remodelling of the physical culture and sport in the former communist countries has been a huge undertaking; and still the process is going on. An organisation like the CSIT has the knowledge, expertise and will as well to take part with this important act of solidarity.

Balance between intellectual and physical education

"Physical exercise belongs to culture, it offers experiences and develops creativity ... Physical will be experienced in a new way. ... Alternative physical exercise is in harmony with the nature ... The basic essence of all physical activity should be game. ..." This might sound familiar to you, but it should be noted that the quotation is taken from the German working sports magazin "Arbeiter-Turn-Zeitung" from its May issue, 1907.

The international working class sport movement has endeavoured to realise the aims of socialist physical culture. Therefore the movement set itself the goal of bringing the socialist physical culture as a part of the workers’ movement. Workers’ sport thus constituted a significant part of the working class culture. Its central task was taken as bringing up of socialist youth, in both mind and body, to be balanced socialist human beings who would have the maturity to realise the social aims of the working class movement.

Traditionally the workers sport movement has a strong link with other workers’ organisations and thereby, for example, the sport movement and the trade union movement have in many countries a tradition of good cooperation, say, in the promoting of mass and employee sports. On the other
hand, the fundamental aims of workers sports have always tended in the
direction of exercising a physical culture policy that is in harmony with the
needs of the people at large.

**Priority of mass sport** over competitive athletics (competitive athletics
could be valuable, toot, as ennobling and exemplary activity, but when
carried to the extreme, competition would lead to degeneration of sports).
Therefore the workers’ sport strove to shake itself free from the signs of the
degeneracy of bourgeois sports – nationalism, chauvinism, commercialism,
professionalism, one-sided emphasis on setting records – all those negative
features it had observed in bourgeois sporting life. The workers sport
movement wanted to bring up the working class youth of the world in the
spirit of peace and international solidarity, separately from the bourgeois
sport movement, so that the above-mentioned fringe phenomena of
bourgeois sporting life would not also spread to the domain of the working
class sport movement.

The aim of the workers sport movement has never been to compete in top
level international sports, across its entire spectrum, at least and, indeed,
that doing so would be unnecessary. Notwithstanding some CSIT affiliates
have proved extremely high competitive standards, too. Merely, as we
know, the CSIT is a platform of **SPORT FOR ALL**, as were the workers
sport organisations of old, too. In 1986 the CSIT was officially recognised
by the International Olympic Committee, in 1989, it was admitted to an
official member of the Commission of Sport for All of the IOC. This is,
without question, one of the most important sport political breakthroughs
the CSIT ever has experienced.

The international sport movement has always needed both independent
workers sport organisations and workers physical culture policy which
takes the form of joint activities in the international sports politics. Nothing
can be stated categorically regarding the superiority of one or the other
model, for the conditions in different countries dictate to a large degree the
terms according to which workers physical culture policy can be practised.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention!