



BSR Conference 2008 | Sustainability: Leadership Required  
**A New Role for Union Leaders?**  
**The Sustainability Agenda at the Forefront**

Plenary Session Summary  
Thursday, November 6, 2008 | 12:30–1:30 p.m.

**Speakers**

- **Sharan Burrow**, President, Australian Council of Trade Unions, and President, International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
- **Christy Hoffman**, Organizing Director, UNI Global Union
- **Neil Kearny**, General Secretary, International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation
- **Marc Gunther**, Senior Writer, Fortune Magazine (moderator)

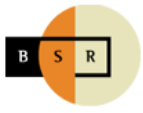
**Highlights**

- Members of the panel felt that current corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts are the first steps to a much-needed deeper dialogue between companies and workers about improving labor rights throughout global supply chains.
- Panelists noted several times that CSR efforts addressing environmental issues and labor rights throughout supply chains create wins for workers, employers, communities, and countries around the world.
- Hoffman and Burrow focused on freedom of association as a fundamental human right. Hoffman highlighted the hypocrisy of business leaders that claim labor rights are important to their company but deny the right to unionize.

**Memorable Quotes**

- In the United States, “organized labor is cynical in that CSR policies are used [by corporations] as a shield against criticism rather than as a proactive tool.” —Christy Hoffman, UNI Global Union
- Speaking about the union perspective on corporations, “We [unions] aren’t your [companies’] worst enemies; we’re your best friends. We want you to be sustainable.” —Sharan Burrow, Australian Council of Trade Unions and International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
- “CSR is a US\$60 billion annual industry [according to a recent report]. These are huge resources, but with limited impact, certainly on the labor front.” —Neil Kearny, International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation





## Business for Social Responsibility

### Overview

Burrow, Hoffman, and Kearny opened the session by highlighting the mixed nature of current CSR efforts. Burrow noted that “all too often it’s a PR exercise.” However, she named the 2005 UN decision to make fair globalization a core issue on the world agenda as a turning point in the drive to deepen CSR efforts. Another positive shift, according to Burrow, is unions’ interest in engaging in honest dialogue with companies about how to create change. Kearny noted that CSR’s limited success has been in increasing awareness of working conditions. He pointed out that Nike wouldn’t respond to a request from a global union 15 years ago, but now he has monthly teleconferences with Nike on labor issues. However, over this same time period real wages in the textile sector have fallen by 25 percent and working hours have increased by 25 percent. He emphasized the need to return responsibility to the workers and empower local suppliers, their workforce, and local governments so they can encourage good corporate-labor regulations.

In response to Gunther’s question about Wal-Mart’s sustainability efforts, Kearny noted that he finds the company fairly responsible on global supply chain issues, but he noted that companies that have an ethical commitment at the top do not necessarily have the same commitment embedded throughout the entire corporate culture.

Burrow responded to a question about companies that claim to be worker friendly but are not necessarily friendly to unions by stating that if companies do not provide the fundamental right to bargain collectively, they are in denial about what fundamental rights are.

Kearny stated that the future of sustainability is about worker empowerment. Successful corporations prioritize labor conditions because they have found that “bad working conditions go hand in hand with bad performance” on quality, delivery, and productivity. He cited the need for clear, well-defined industrial relations management systems that engage all employees and enable companies to deal with problems before they become too large. He also pointed out that companies achieve much more when they cooperate with their workers than when there is constant conflict and campaigning.

In response to a closing question about jobs in a green economy, Burrow discussed the need for engagement between labor, corporations, and government to encourage regulations that support the development of appropriate skills for and investment in green jobs.

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This summary is also available on [www.bsr.org/bsrconferences/2008/session-summaries.cfm](http://www.bsr.org/bsrconferences/2008/session-summaries.cfm).

