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INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS (ICFTU)

ICFTU OnLine...

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Historic world union congress concludes by electing first woman president

Brussels, 13 December 2004 (ICFTU online): On Friday December 10, the Executive Board of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) elected Sharan Burrow, President of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, to the post of ICFTU President. Burrow will be the first woman to hold the position. The board was meeting immediately after the close in Miyazaki, Japan of the ICFTU Congress, the world's largest and most representative meeting of trade union organisations.

"I look forward to working closely with ICFTU General Secretary Guy Ryder in the process of creating a new union international," commented Burrow after the board meeting, "This is a critical period for the global union movement - high on the agenda, also, will be increasing our work on organising, and intensifying our relationship with the sectoral global union federations to engage multinational companies on a global level, to ensure that they live up to their obligations and to stop exploitation in their supply chains. "

During the Congress, Burrow chaired the Resolutions Committee, which steered through fifteen resolutions including the Congress theme resolution entitled "Globalising Solidarity - Building a Global Union Movement for the Future" (<http://congress.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991220453>), which gives the ICFTU a mandate to undertake a series of reforms in its own structures and working methods, and to move toward unification with the World Confederation of Labour.

The election of the first woman president of the ICFTU is historically significant for the global trade union movement and occurs at a time of high participation for women at the ICFTU Congress with over 25%, the highest ever number, of positions on the ICFTU's Executive Board (1) now held by women.

Burrow takes up the role immediately and follows Jackson Shamenda, Honorary President of the Zambian Congress of Trade Unions, who steps down after a four year stint in the post. Burrow will continue as President of the ACTU and fulfil the responsibilities of the two roles.

The election followed the close of a congress which saw a number of other important changes for the ICFTU. Taking over the chairmanship of the ICFTU Steering Committee and becoming ICFTU Deputy President is Michael Sommer, chairman of the German trade union centre, the DGB, which represents over seven million members.

A Palestinian will sit on the ICFTU Executive Board for the first time ever, with the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions holding one of the two seats reserved for trade union organisations from the Middle East. The Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR), with 28 million members, takes up seats on the ICFTU Executive Board and Steering Committee for the first time.

The ICFTU constitution saw a number of amendments, in particular boosting the role of youth and women in the ICFTU. The ICFTU youth committee now has a constitutional status, underlining the vital importance of the recruitment of young workers to the international trade union movement. There are also stronger stipulations regarding the future gender composition of union delegations to the ICFTU Congress.

Also, for the first time, Global Unions, combining the 12 major organisations of the international trade union movement (<http://www.global-unions.org>) is referenced explicitly in the ICFTU Constitution. In the objectives of the ICFTU, it is now stated that the ICFTU is to "develop and reinforce joint action with the Global Union Federations and the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC), under the common identity of Global Unions, through arrangements made by agreement between the partner organisations of Global Unions". The Global Unions identity was first presented to the world at the ICFTU congress in Durban in 2000, although a close working relationship between the 12 Global Unions partners has existed for much longer.

In another development, TUAC will enjoy, for the first time, formalised representational rights in the ICFTU Steering Committee, Congress and Executive Board.

The Congress also considered issues of concern beyond its own structures and working methods. In addition to the Prime Minister of Japan, two heads of state addressed the Congress (Finland and Tanzania) as did the ILO Director-General and the Executive Director of the Global Fund against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Special sessions were held on two important global issues for unions - the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the fight against HIV and AIDS. A new report was released during the Congress to highlight the exploitative treatment of workers in Export Processing Zones.

You can find day-by-day coverage of the Congress at: <http://congress.icftu.org>

MDGs: <http://congress.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991221074>

AIDS: <http://congress.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991221034>

EPZ report: <http://congress.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991220996>

(1) The ICFTU Executive Board meets at least once a year, and steers the ICFTU's work between Congresses, which usually occur every four years.

The ICFTU represents 148 million workers in 233 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a member of Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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