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INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS (ICFTU)

ICFTU OnLine...

Making solidarity work - On the road to reform

Miyazaki, Japan, 7 December 2004 (ICFTU Online): Analysing the strengths and weakness of the international trade union movement was the task before the Congress plenary (<http://congress.icftu.org> <<http://congress.icftu.org/>>) this Tuesday. Relations between the ICFTU and its regional organisations were on the agenda, together with the strengthening of the Global Unions partnership and the restructuring of the standing committees.

The international trade union movement is in the habit of demanding reform, but reforming itself is the challenge it now has to meet if it wants to increase its influence and visibility. That was the substance of part II of the report "Globalising Solidarity" which Guy Ryder presented to Congress delegates on Tuesday. It was a difficult challenge, and one well received by all those who took the floor. "It was very brave of you to take on such a task" Tine Aurvig-Huggenberger of the LO-Denmark told the ICFTU General Secretary. "You knew that this report was not going to win you popularity with everyone, but it had to be done, particularly because the increasing autonomy of the regional organisations since 1996 is doing nothing to contribute to trade union unity". Unity that is essential at a time when so many forces are at work to divide workers.

One of the most delicate issues broached in the report was the link between the ICFTU and its three regional organisations. The executive boards of the ORIT, AFRO and APRO had expressed some reservations, both about the report's proposal to end the regional conferences and congresses, and the proposal to require that the election of the ICFTU's regional secretaries be ratified by the ICFTU's world Executive Board. There was, however, no explicit criticism of the proposals to coordinate accounting and auditing policies or of the joint planning and coordination of work programmes.

The ICFTU Executive Board, meeting on Saturday in Miyazaki, took the views of the regional organisations into account and submitted a new text for discussion by the Congress plenary. Its proposals were supported by the great majority of Tuesday's speakers. The text stated that there was a need to re-examine the existing working arrangements between the ICFTU headquarters and the Regional Organisations with a view to promoting cohesive, unified and concerted global action, but that the regional conferences and congresses should continue. Their primary purpose would be the adoption of policies and strategies designed specifically to promote the implementation of world ICFTU policies in ways appropriate to regional conditions. The need to subject the election of Regional Secretaries to ratification by the Executive Board of the ICFTU, exactly as currently provided for in the constitutions of APRO and AFRO, was retained in the text put before delegates, and was not challenged in the discussions. Upon this ratification, Regional Secretaries would be accorded the constitutional status of ICFTU Assistant General Secretary.

Another of the proposals to be discussed, the strengthening of the partnership between the members of the Global Unions family, won the almost unanimous support of those who took the floor, notably the proposal to create a new body - perhaps a "Global Unions Council" - which would more closely link collective discussions with the decision-making bodies of the respective organisations. The leaders of the TUAC and the Global Union Federations made particular mention of this when expressing their satisfaction with the Global Unions group and their wish to deepen the partnership. William Madisha of COSATU (South Africa) warned, however, that the Global Unions Council should not be composed solely of the general secretaries of the GUFs, the TUAC and the ICFTU, as it would be geographically unrepresentative.

Turning to the need for improving communications, several speakers agreed with the need to make more use of new information technology, but stressed that the ICFTU should maintain or even increase its range of languages. Several regions felt excluded from the debate because of the predominance of a single language. "Those who don't come from Europe or the United States sometimes feel that they are being kept out of the discussions because of the language problem" explained Kazou Hitoni from Rengo, the Congress's host organisation. Joao Proença of the UGT (Portugal) and Mody Guiro of the CNTS (Senegal) also stressed the importance of linguistic diversity in the international trade union movement.

The report's proposal to restrict the number of standing structures created by the ICFTU over the years (there are 16 of them) was approved by delegates, although some, such as Jacqueline Lequeux of the FGTB (Belgium) and Edith Snoeij of the FNV (Netherlands) expressed strong opposition to the removal of some of these structures, notably the human and trade union rights committee. "Every year, the ICFTU Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights shows that the situation is getting worse" explained Jacqueline Lequeux. "In our view it is not logical to abolish this committee when the defence of trade union rights forms the basis of so much of our work." Several speakers expressed their satisfaction at the continuation of other committees, such as those on youth, women and the Middle East.

The quality of the debate on Tuesday once again demonstrated delegates' firm desire to strengthen international trade unionism. "This is the ICFTU's 18th World Congress. At 18 you come of age. Let's hope we come of age this week" concluded Pdraig Crumlin of the ACTU (Australia) on a lighter note.

The ICFTU represents 148 million workers in 234 affiliated organisations in 152 countries and territories. The ICFTU is also a member of Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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