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INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS (ICFTU)

## ICFTU OnLine...

### Towards unification - New trade union international could be created by 2006

Miyazaki, Japan, 8 December 2004 (ICFTU Online): Delegates meeting in plenary (<http://congress.icftu.org> <<http://congress.icftu.org/>> ) gave their full backing on Wednesday to the unification of the ICFTU, the WCL and independent, democratic national trade union centres. Ill-intentioned employers and governments will no longer be able to exploit their divisions.

There was universal approval for the proposed unification of the international trade union movement, the subject of Wednesday's debate. Speaker after speaker expressed their firm support for what many described as an historic step, the full significance of which was summed up by Guy Ryder in his introduction: "What you are asked to decide today colleagues is whether to commit the ICFTU to the creation of a new international trade union confederation, bringing together the democratic independent forces of world trade unionism."

The third chapter of the theme report summarised the history of ICFTU relations with the World Confederation of Labour and the status of recent discussions. It went on to present what Guy Ryder described as the "overwhelming" case for unification in a new international confederation which would include the ICFTU, WCL and organisations that at present are not affiliated to either. That unification would have to be based on strong principles, outlined in the appendix to the report. As Guy Ryder said: "No compromise on principles, no sacrifice on values".

More effective representation, strength in unity and the pooling of resources were just some of the arguments put forward for unification. Several speakers pointed out that the job of representing the interests of working people could be done far better if there was just one international. As Adams Oshiomole of the NLC Nigeria put it simply: "We cannot afford to have two heads to serve one body". At the same time it was essential to the survival of the trade union movement, as continued division would merely serve the interests of its enemies. Mademba Sock of the UNSAS Senegal, for example, urged Congress to have the confidence and intelligence to take this path, because "we cannot afford to fail", or, as Ruben Cortina of CGT Argentina put it, "we cannot afford the luxury of remaining divided." Continuing the theme of division, Sally Hunt of the TUC Great Britain recalled that "for fifty years we have been letting bad employers and bad governments get away with far too much while we disagreed with each other."

However the proposal for unification did not concern the ICFTU and the WCL alone. The inclusion of national trade union centres who currently have no international affiliation as co-founders proved to be the only real point of controversy in the debate. Finally, in view of the reservations expressed by some, notably Jean-Claude Mailly of the CGT-FO France, it was agreed to discuss the relevant wording in the Resolutions Committee, with a view to including them as members but not cofounders.

One of the more complicated areas that had to be dealt with was the different relationships that the two internationals had with their regional and sectoral organisations, as the ICFTU's regional organisations were a part of its structure, while their WCL counterparts have far greater autonomy. On a positive note, it was announced that the ORIT, the ICFTU's regional organisation for the Americas, was to be holding talks with CLAT, its WCL counterpart.

The nature of the new organisation's relationship with the ETUC, which has affiliates belonging to both the ICFTU and the WCL but is affiliated to neither, has also yet to be defined. What was clear was that it did wish to be a part

of the new trade union architecture. The case of the continued autonomy of the ETUC was put by the CFDT, pointing to its role in negotiations with the European Union and European employers.

At the sectoral level, the WCL organisations are an integral part of its structure while the Global Union Federations were independent of the ICFTU, and had made it clear to the ICFTU General Secretary that they intended to remain fully autonomous in any decisions to be taken. That said, some were already exploring closer relations with the equivalent WCL structures, notably Education International.

Many welcomed the transparency of the process, stressing the importance of the involvement of the national affiliates. Michael Sommer of the DBG was one of them, insisting that the ICFTU Executive Board must be actively involved in the negotiations and that the General Secretary should agree negotiating positions with its members.

There were a few differences of opinion on the pace of negotiations. If this ICFTU Congress approved unification, the next and final hurdle would be the WCL Congress in October 2005, followed by the creation of the new organisation, if all went well, in 2006. Some, such as the delegates from the DGB Germany and LO Sweden felt the timetable was too ambitious, while others, such as Andrzej Adamczyk of NSZZ Solidarnosc, Poland, said there was no time to lose. Zainal Rampak of the MTUC Malaysia, expressed his full confidence in the General Secretary's ability to achieve unity in three months. "Guy - I think you can do it."

<http://congress.icftu.org>

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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