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INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS (ICFTU)

ICFTU OnLine...

The Millennium Development Goals: The world's trade unions need to unite in the global anti-poverty campaign

Miyazaki, Japan, 8 December 2004 (ICFTU Online): The world has the knowledge, technology and wealth required to greatly reduce poverty. However, is there the popular desire and political commitment needed to secure such changes? This Thursday's debate questioned the political will, criticised the actions of the international financial institutions and called for a stronger trade union campaign against poverty.

In September 2000, the Member States of the United Nations signed up to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The vision presented through these 8 objectives is one of a world free of extreme poverty and hunger (1). They will not be enough in themselves to eradicate poverty, but their achievement would represent a major step forward towards improving the quality of life of millions of workers and their families. The heads of government promised to act and to make available the resources needed to free millions of people from the shackles of extreme poverty.

2015 is the deadline set for the achievement of all the goals, apart from the one on education, which was set for 2005. That first goal will not be attained. Since 2000 many countries have slipped even further down the poverty ladder. 1.2 billion people still live on one US dollar a day or less. One in five children is not enrolled in primary school. Nearly 11 million children under five die each year, most from easily treatable diseases. "These catastrophic statistics are not inevitable but the result of choices made by the world's leaders", stated the director of the UN campaign supporting the MDGs, Salil Shetty. "It is a situation created by human beings, and as such is entirely possible to change".

None of the other goals will be achieved by 2015, unless there is a major recovery of ambition, determination and action. The IMF representative, Hiroyuki Hino, declared to the ICFTU Congress that despite the criticism levelled against them the Bretton Woods institutions regard the campaign against poverty as a major priority and support fundamental labour standards. The trade unionists who then took the floor challenged him on that claim. "The IMF is largely responsible for today's level of poverty owing to its policies", stressed Hans Engelberts, the General Secretary of PSI. "It is not enough to invite us every two years for a discussion: you must show your commitment in a concrete way, and that is not happening. What has happened, for example, to the idea of loans being conditional on respect for fundamental labour standards?"

What's the point of growth without job creation?

As the unions repeatedly stress, jobs are vital in the fight against poverty. Global unemployment is hitting 185 million people. And millions of people with jobs are forced to work dangerously long hours for poverty pay. Hiroyuki Hino gave a number of examples of countries where he said IMF policies had helped create growth, but failed to convince the trade union assembly. Mody Guiro of the CNTS (Senegal) was one of those who criticised the IMF: "You are talking about growth, but in Africa we have seen that that growth has not created many jobs! How can you claim to be combating poverty without creating jobs, which is the best way to do so?"

2005 will be the test, since a unique combination of political events will thrust poverty onto the global political agenda: the G8 Summit will meet from 6 to 8 July in Scotland, then the heads of state and government of the whole world will meet at the UN in New York in September 2005 to assess progress on the MDGs over the last five years, and lastly the WTO Ministerial Conference will be held in Hong Kong from 13 to 18 December 2005. In a video shown to the congress room some prominent people like Bono and Juan Somavia called on the world leaders to use these opportunities finally to take the right decisions for achieving the goals, which included concerted global action to increase development aid, cancel the debt and promote free trade. Others are following their lead, as Doris Henderson (TUC-GB) explained: "I come from the main finance union in Britain (UNIFI) and my members want to see governments drop the debt."

At each of these events in 2005, hundreds of organisations from countries in the North and the South are preparing to challenge the politicians and decision-makers to honour the commitments they have made on combating poverty. They have launched a global anti-poverty campaign which calls on the whole world to unite in international solidarity to fight poverty. The unions of the whole world are invited to join in that campaign. Information on the preparations made at international level for this global campaign will be available from the ICFTU, the Global Union Federations or the following website: www.whiteband.org

It is vital that the unions of the North and the South take action in each of their countries, and in a coordinated fashion, if we are to improve the lot of the hundreds of millions of workers living in conditions unfit for human beings. 2005 will provide a unique opportunity to influence the global agenda on combating poverty. Let's not miss this chance!

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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