

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

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Trade unions demand strong workers' rights in new European GSP

Brussels, 24th March 2005 (ICFTU Online): European Union member states must include strong clauses to defend workers' rights in the new Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) Regulation providing trade benefits for developing countries, says the international trade union movement, speaking ahead of the COREPER committee(*) meeting in Brussels.

The ICFTU, European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and World Confederation of Labour (WCL) are deeply concerned at reports that the European Commission and certain member states are considering a clause to water down the GSP's labour standards content. The reported proposals could weaken the trade regulation's long-standing link to ratification and implementation of the eight fundamental workers' rights conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). For example, countries such as El Salvador would still benefit from "GSP-plus" trade benefits(**) under the GSP despite its failing to ratify the two International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions on fundamental trade union rights, and its government's troubling record of violations of labour rights.

"These reported proposals fall way short of labour rights conventions ratified by well over a hundred countries and are nothing short of unacceptable" said ICFTU General Secretary Guy Ryder. "The ratification of core labour conventions has until now been a prerequisite for the granting of trade benefits under the GSP-plus system, and its predecessors. The international trade union movement doubts that the European Union wishes its GSP to contribute to a race to the bottom."

WCL General Secretary Willy Thys stated that, "The repercussions of the proposed exemption would be felt far beyond the GSP system itself and prompt a generalised weakening of international efforts to ensure ratification and implementation of ILO conventions."

Commenting on other urgent GSP matters, the international trade union organisations further emphasized the need for the European Commission to rapidly conclude its investigation, launched under the GSP system, into the violation of fundamental workers' rights in Belarus.

"The Commission must reach the inevitable conclusion that Belarus is not complying with its obligations to respect basic international labour conventions, most notably freedom of association," stated Ryder.

The international trade union organisations also underlined the necessity for the government of Sri Lanka to implement the "road map" to establish its compliance with core labour standards.

"The text of the GSP plus system is categorical and unequivocal: all beneficiaries must ratify and implement fully all fundamental workers' human rights conventions. This applies equally to El Salvador, to Sri Lanka and to any other current or potential beneficiary, and the trade union movement will not hesitate to demand an investigation into any country that is in breach of its GSP obligations", stated ETUC General Secretary John Monks.

"We insist that the GSP plus must continue to serve as an incentive for the full respect of all fundamental workers' rights, and consequently, COREPER should take a decision not to support any sort of exemption clause for any country," he concluded.

[Click here for letter to Peter Mandelson, European Commissioner for](#)

Trade, on this issue:

<http://www.icftu.org/www/pdf/lettermandelsonfinal.pdf>

* COREPER is the Committee of Permanent Representatives in Brussels of EU member states.

** The "GSP-plus" system provides increased trade benefits, through reduced tariffs, for countries that have ratified and implement fully a specified number of international human rights, workers' rights, women's rights and environmental conventions.

The ICFTU represents 145 million workers in 233 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a partner in Global

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