

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

ICFTU Online

029/160206

Clemenceau returns, but health and safety blight remains

Brussels, 16 February 2006 (ICFTU online): The decision on 15 February by French President Jacques Chirac to recall the toxic warship Clemenceau back to France underlines the depth of the crisis in the global ship-breaking industry. The aircraft carrier, containing tonnes of asbestos and many other hazardous substances, was due to have been broken at the Alang ship-breaking yard in India, however decisions by Indian and French judicial authorities led to the French government's change of course.

"This case shows just how serious the lack of decent global standards is in ship-breaking", said Marcello Malentacchi, General Secretary of the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF), adding that "thousands of workers in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and elsewhere face daily exploitation and exposure to life-threatening hazards due to the inability of the international system to establish and enforce standards".

The IMF and the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) has been sharply critical of the International Maritime Organisation's (IMO) blocking of a process involving the IMO, the International Labour Organisation and the Basel Convention to harmonise shipbreaking guidelines. The IMO's stance at a December 2005 meeting on harmonisation is believed by the IMF to have set progress back by as much as five years.

"There have been grave doubts as to whether the the Alang facility is properly equipped to handle the asbestos and other toxic substances in the Clemenceau, but this one ship is just the tip of the iceberg. Thousands of workers at Alang and similar yards in a number of countries depend on ship breaking for their livelihoods, and to date little if anything has been done to ensure that they are able to earn a decent living in safe and hygienic workplaces", said ICFTU General Secretary Guy Ryder. "Governments, international agencies and in particular the global ship breaking industry have a responsibility to sort out this mess", he added.

A substantial proportion of the workers at the Alang yard are paid less than US\$1 per day, and the great majority are employed on a daily or sometimes monthly basis. Local trade unions are working with the workers, many of whom are migrants from other parts of India, to help them organise to improve the working conditions and increase their incomes, however resistance from employers and lack of enforcement of labour laws makes this particularly difficult.

The IMF will be continuing its support to the local trade unions in their efforts to organise the workers and is, with the ICFTU, the ITF and other Global Unions partners, step up pressure on governments, international agencies and the companies involved, to bring the world ship-breaking industry up to acceptable employment, health, safety and environmental standards.

The ICFTU represents 155 million workers in 236 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a member of Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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