

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

ICFTU Online
061 /060406

Migration from Africa to Europe: promoting development, decent work and the real needs of the labour market

Brussels, 7 April 2006 (ICFTU online): Following the interregional dialogue between Africa and Europe in Brussels, from 4 to 6 April 2006, top-level government ministers, members of employers' organisations, as well as African and European trade union leaders agreed on a "road map" that addresses immigration in terms of decent work and economic development, rather than from the simplistic and inappropriate security perspective that is too often preferred.

Since the European Union will be facing a population decrease of 20 million between now and 2050, which the ILO estimates will lead to a 20% drop in the average standard of living in Europe, the participants at the meeting stressed the extent to which "unlawful migration" is "exacerbated by restrictive migration policies at odds with the needs of the labour market".

As Sofiane Ben Hamida, Director of the International Department of the Union Générale des Travailleurs de Tunisie (UGTT) put it: "the solution does not lie in security but in sustainable economic development, the absence of which is a root cause of all this migration". Her view was echoed by many trade unionists and indeed by many of the employers' representatives from African countries at the meeting.

The meeting itself was organised by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) as the culmination of a 3-year programme aimed at building interregional partnerships and cooperation on key issues such as protection of migrant workers, the needs of labour markets, management of labour migration and anticipation of future migratory flows.

Since the ICFTU has adopted a special action programme on migrant workers, this meeting provided an opportunity to draw attention to the 4 key areas on which the unions are working. These are policy, i.e. the need to evaluate and take part in decision-making on migration policies; information and awareness-raising campaigns for workers and the public at national level; cooperation and international solidarity; and, of course, organising migrant workers. The latter concern is undoubtedly the hardest challenge facing the unions, as expressed by Makame Launi Makame, of the Zanzibar Trade Union Congress (ZATUC): "Zanzibar is a small land which is receiving a lot of migrant workers, particularly from Kenya and Uganda, who are coming to work in the tourism sector which has a great shortage of labour. But owing to the attitudes of the investors in this sector, who are mostly Italian, we have great problems organising these workers".

At the heart of this four-pronged trade union approach is the protection of migrant workers' rights, i.e. human rights, fundamental workers' rights, equal treatment and equal opportunities. In regards to protection of migrant workers from discrimination, participants from East Africa drew attention to the widespread use of HIV/AIDS tests when recruiting migrant workers, which contravenes international rules.

The meeting gave the social partners plenty of opportunities to comment on some burning issues concerning immigration. Mauritania has, for instance, recently become a popular route for illegal immigrants, particularly as a result of the increasing surveillance by Morocco of its coastline and of the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. Mauritania has hit the headlines almost every day, as a result of the macabre listing of illegal immigrants who have perished at sea or been sent back after attempting to reach Spain. Over 3,000 illegal immigrants have been intercepted off the Canary Islands since the start of 2006. Between 200 and 1,000 are believed to have drowned, based on differing estimates.

For Mauritania, which has signed freedom of movement agreements with 14 African countries but has not yet ratified the ILO conventions on protection of migrant workers "this is a major human drama. The

country's legislation in this area is 40 years out of date and totally obsolete. The public and the political, economic and social actors are not prepared for dealing with the impact of this huge influx of immigrants", stressed Mamadou Niang, International and Development Cooperation Secretary at the Confédération Générale des Travailleurs Mauritaniens (CGTM), an ICFTU affiliate. "Within the 5+5 partnership linking the countries on both sides of the Mediterranean, a multi-sectoral and multidimensional approach is needed for dealing more effectively with illegal immigration", he continued, before concluding that: "cooperation with neighbouring countries that are providing these would-be emigrants is also a priority, as is the need to involve the national social actors such as trade union organisations in the arrangements for tackling this problem".

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For more information, please contact the ICFTU Press Department on +32 2 224 0204 or +32 476 621 018.

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