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EU Action to put decent work on international agenda is urgently needed

Brussels, 23 May 2006: Tomorrow, the European Commission is due to issue a Communication on 'decent work' -- putting workers' rights and basic employment standards on the European and international political agendas. Trade unions and social stakeholders welcome this overdue initiative, calling on EU and international decision-makers to take firm action to deliver Decent Work for all.

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the World Confederation of Labour (WCL), the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), Solidar and the Global Progressive Forum strongly believe that 'decent work' is an issue that has been neglected for too long by aid, trade and development organisations. Despite the development of international labour standards adopted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), organisations such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank have done very little to make sure that basic workers' rights are respected.

ILO figures show that over 200 million children are in paid work, over 12 million people are in forced labour, and over 2 million workers die every year due to work-related accidents and diseases. Last year, 145 people worldwide were murdered for their trade union activities.

"The rights of workers have fallen off the agenda," said Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, Chair of the Global Progressive Forum. "It is no wonder so many people are becoming disillusioned with globalisation when a fundamental right such as decent work is not even being discussed. Nobody can allow child labour, forced labour and the right to a living wage to drop off the radar screen as if they no longer mattered. I am all for trade liberalisation, but only if it is accompanied by action to end child labour, to end the misery of working poverty, to give ordinary people a decent life. It is very positive that the European Commission wants to start promoting decent work. Now it needs to put words into action. The ILO core labour standards should be taken more seriously by governments and the international institutions. It would also be good if the Commission did something to improve working conditions in Europe."

"Economic growth should not be considered as an aim in itself, but as a means to ensure decent work and a decent life for all the people of Europe and worldwide," said Ian Derry, Solidar acting Secretary-General. He went on: "The European Commission should recognise that the promotion of decent work is a matter of coherence between its policies. There is a need to re-focus European development cooperation and trade policy to ensure that decent work is a central policy objective. It needs to be explicitly recognised, in both policy and practice, that the creation of decent work is key to the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals."

Said Guy Ryder, ICFTU General Secretary: "We are heartened by the fact that this paper takes a serious look at how the EU can promote decent work in and outside its borders. However, at the same time we believe the EU needs to reconsider some of the demands it is making on developing countries in the WTO's NAMA negotiations, which could derail many of the benefits that we hope decent work will bring. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and the international trade union movement will be watching with great interest how this commendable initiative is followed up in practice."

"The Communication of the Commission leads in the right direction," said John Monks, ETUC General Secretary. "The EU has a specific responsibility to promote decent work in and outside Europe. We need a more effective implementation of the Lisbon Strategy for more and better jobs to combat excessively high levels of unemployment and increasing

poverty. And we need a European aid, development and trade policy that is coherent with the European Social Model."

The European Commission's Communication is likely to acknowledge that international trade and economic growth have not consistently contributed to reducing poverty, and do not necessarily lead to new jobs or improved conditions for workers. It is also expected to propose promoting decent work in enlargement negotiations and through its neighbourhood policy, as well as through regional and bilateral links with Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and Asia.

"We believe in partnership agreements between the EU and other regions of the world that genuinely include a social dimension, rest on social dialogue and ILO Conventions and contribute decisively to fostering decent work," added Willy Thys, WCL Secretary-General.

Decent Work is a key element in building fair, equitable and inclusive societies based on the principles of access to employment, workers' rights, equality between women and men, social protection and social dialogue.

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The ICFTU represents 155 million workers in 236 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. <http://www.icftu.org>

ICFTU is also a partner in Global Unions.

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