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INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

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Trade Union Summit: 10 years of ASEM - time to deliver!

Brussels, 7 September 2006 (ICFTU Online): While the leaders of Asia and Europe will meet in Helsinki this weekend for the VI ASEM Summit, the trade unions of these countries are organising on Thursday and Friday in the same city a parallel Trade Union Summit under the slogan: "10 years of ASEM - time to deliver!"

Finland's President Ms Tarja Halonen will address the Trade Union Summit on the afternoon of September the 8th. Finnish labour minister Ms Tarja Filatov will speak on the 7th, just prior to a panel with representatives from European and Asian trade unions, the ILO, the European Commission, NGOs and the Asia-Europe Business Forum (AEBF).

During their Summit, trade unions will take stock of the high level dialogues that have been taking place under the auspices of ASEM over the last ten years. Although these dialogues have covered a wide range of issues, including economic, political and cultural topics, trade unions argue that ASEM has not succeeded in addressing the main concerns of the peoples of both regions. The main reason for this deficiency has been the overwhelming attention devoted to investment and trade issues. ASEM has been unable to deliver on any promises concerning social coherence, decent work, good governance or respect for human rights. However, the long-standing call of trade unions for an ASEM social dimension has resulted in Germany hosting the first-ever meeting of ASEM labour and employment ministers. This two day conference taking place in Potsdam on 3-5 September was held under the heading of "More and Better Jobs - Working Jointly to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Globalisation".

Although unions welcome this recent ASEM initiative, they remain critical of a top-down approach which has failed to recognise the value of civil society's contribution to the process. While the Asia Europe Business Forum was launched as one of the first initiatives at the 1st ASEM Summit held in Bangkok in 1996, as of this date ASEM leaders still refuse to grant unions a similar consultative status. The ASEM structure itself needs to be modified if the process is to make a difference for ASEM's people.

Another point on the trade unions' agenda concerns the challenges posed by the repression of workers' rights in certain ASEM member countries. In particular unions have expressed their concerns about those Asian countries that have chosen an export oriented model of economic growth based upon the suppression of workers' core rights in order to obtain a labour cost advantage. For years the unions of Europe and Asia have been arguing that ASEM has the potential to reverse this social race to the bottom by promoting the ILO decent work agenda at both the regional and national levels.

Finally, with the presence of trade unionists from Burma (Myanmar) in

the meeting, the Trade Union Summit will be calling on ASEM leaders to build all possible political and economic pressure to force the government of Burma to respect fundamental human rights including freedom of association and the elimination of forced labour. Unfortunately, the massive and continued human rights violations taking place in this country for more than four decades did not prevent ASEM leaders from admitting Burma as a member in 2004.

The trade union Summit will include speeches from ICFTU General Secretary Guy Ryder, WCL General Secretary Willy Thys, ETUC General Secretary John Monks, ICFTU-APRO President Govindasamy Rajasekaran and ICFTU-APRO General Secretary Noriyuki Suzuki, and BATU General Secretary Necie Lucero.

The final trade union statement can be found here:

(<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991224959&Language=EN>)

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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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