

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

ICFTU OnLine...

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ASEM: A step in the right direction

Brussels, 14 September 2006 (ICFTU OnLine): Trade unions welcome the outcome of the Sixth Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) held in Helsinki on September 10 &11. The conclusions of the Meeting went further than ever before at ASEM in calling for the strengthening of the social dimension of globalization, and underline that productive employment, decent work and the protection of the rights of all workers are crucial for sustainable socio-economic development. The meeting called for substantive ASEM dialogue and cooperation on labour and employment issues.

All these issues are long-needed progress at ASEM resulting from sustained trade union pressure over many years, and emphasised when the trade unions met Finnish President Tarja Halonen in Helsinki on 8 September. In fact it took 10 years for ASEM to organize its first ever labour and employment minister meeting, finally held on 3-5 September this year in Potsdam, Germany. The fact that ASEM leaders have now agreed to pursue this dialogue on an ongoing basis is a victory for the unions who have been arguing for the last 10 years that ASEM would not deliver for the people of Europe and Asia unless a substantive social dimension was added to the ASEM process.

Another positive outcome is the endorsement by all ASEM Leaders of the conclusions of the labour and employment ministers meeting in Potsdam. The ICFTU, the WCL and the ETUC support the conclusions of this meeting which underline the importance of policies respecting and promoting human and social rights, particularly those set out in the ILO decent work agenda and the ILO 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. The conclusions state that "further cooperation should also try to involve the social partners and other relevant actors in an appropriate way".

The situation in Burma was extensively discussed in both the labour ministers' meeting and the Summit itself. ASEM Leaders expressed their deep concern at the lack of tangible progress and lack of inclusiveness in the process towards national reconciliation. Unions are calling for the UN Security Council to adopt a binding resolution on Burma in order to put an end to its widespread practices of forced labour and to achieve a peaceful outcome to the political stalemate in the country.

It is the first time since the beginning of the ASEM process ten years ago that unions' voice has been heard so effectively. A battle has been won. The ICFTU, the WCL and the ETUC count on the Helsinki Summit to mark the beginning of a constructive and ongoing dialogue between social partners and ASEM leaders. The next step must be to balance the privileged status accorded to the Asia-Europe Business Forum 10 years ago by achieving recognition of trade unions' consultative role by the ASEM structure.

The ICFTU represents 155 million workers in 241 affiliated organizations in 156 countries and territories: <http://www.icftu.org> ICFTU is also a partner in Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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