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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

ITUC OnLine...

ITUC and TUAC express opposition to current Korea-united states free trade agreement

Brussels, 28 June 2007 (ITUC OnLine): On the occasion of the finalisation of preparations for signing a free trade agreement between South Korea and the U.S. on June 30, known as the KORUS-FTA, the ITUC together with the Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC) to the OECD have joined their affiliates in Korea and the US in expressing their opposition to the agreement as it currently stands.

The impending signature of the KORUS-FTA has brought about a strike this week by the Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU), protesting against the agreement as part of a broad coalition of Korean groups in opposition to the KORUS-FTA. Last year, both affiliates in Korea of the ITUC and TUAC, the FKTU and the KCTU, joined the AFL-CIO in the US in expressing their deep concern at the course of the KORUS negotiations.

Although the government has threatened to declare this strike of the KMWU illegal, the latest report on Korea by the Committee on Freedom of Association of the ILO remained highly critical of the government of Korea for its continued repression of trade union rights. The Committee emphasized the Government's failure to fulfil the commitment it had made to ratify Conventions 87 and 98 of the ILO when an ILO high-level tripartite mission visited Korea and reported to the Governing Body in 1998.

The ITUC considers that trade agreements should lead to the creation of decent jobs and development and provide for the protection of core labour standards. Yet the provisions for protection of such standards in the KORUS-FTA remain far too limited to be readily put into operation. While the agreement is reported to include a possible provision for fines in cases of violation of core labour standards, the maximum penalties stand to be much lower than those applicable in cases of commercial breaches of the agreement, and so risk being ineffective.

Furthermore, in negotiating this agreement, neither government has evaluated the likely economic and social impact the deal will have on workers. Yet it is likely, as has been highlighted by the International Metalworkers' Federation to which the KMWU is affiliated, that if signed this free trade agreement will lead to an acceleration of capital mobility and financial speculation between Korea and the US, contributing to further restructuring and driving down of wages, employment stability and working conditions.

The ITUC and TUAC are calling therefore for:

- * Postponement of the agreement until it has been redesigned so as to promote decent work and respect for core labour standards;
- * a full and public assessment of the economic and social impact of the FTA on workers in both countries;
- * safeguards for public services, workers' rights, the environment and economic development;

* Implementation in both the US and Korea of the ILO's core labour standards and of the recommendations of the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association to the governments of both countries.

Founded on 1 November 2006, the ITUC represents 168 million workers in 153 countries and territories and has 304 national affiliates.

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