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ITUC and ETUC Call on EU to Root Economic Partnership in Development

Brussels, 26 September 2008 (ITUC OnLine): in a new statement issued today, the ITUC and the ETUC have called on the EU to listen to its partners in ACP countries and to concentrate on a pro-development approach in negotiating Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs).

The EPAs are a new trade arrangement between Europe and the ACP (Africa, Caribbean, Pacific) countries which aim at putting their trade relationships in conformity with WTO rules. However, there is concern that EPAs could require ACP countries to open their economies unsustainably beyond their world-level commitments.

"I agree with the African Union's Commissioner for Economic Affairs, Dr Maxwell M Mwezalamba, when he says that EPAs should promote development, regional integration and a reduction in poverty," said John Monks, ETUC general secretary. He added "and I also agree that if some countries do not sign full EPAs, then there should be a way of ensuring that their trade with the EU can continue."

As of now only the Caribbean region has confirmed its intention to sign a regional full EPA, possibly in October, although the date of signature has already been postponed several times. Negotiations with African and Pacific nations have been tense all along and could not be finalised before the end of 2007, the WTO-imposed deadline. As a result interim EPAs were agreed upon with 20 individual African and Pacific countries

"While the European Commission sees interim EPAs as a stepping stone for regional full EPAs, many aspects of the agreements as currently proposed risk undermining ACP countries," said Guy Ryder, ITUC general secretary. "We urge the European Commission to show flexibility in the negotiations so as to ensure that EPAs contribute to the development prospects of ACP countries instead."

In particular, trade in services, investment, public procurement, competition policies and intellectual property should not be imposed in the negotiations, and the EU should not demand that ACP countries open up to 80% of their markets to imports.

Instead, EPAs need to become real instruments for the development of ACP countries - which include many of the poorest countries in the world - and fully support endogenous regional integration processes as defined by ACP states. Indeed, trade agreements struck between the EU and individual ACP countries regardless of the regional context might fragment already weak regional integration processes. In place of such deals, trade unions support the inclusion of development benchmarks in the EPA texts. These would reflect the development priorities of the ACP countries at both national and regional levels and make the realisation of trade liberalisation contingent on the level of economic and social development of each country in its process of regional integration.

"Equally important is the call for strong, effective and operational social and labour chapters as full part of EPAs," said Ryder. "Trade can never be fair if comparative advantages are based on the exploitation of workers when they are not allowed to organise."

"The social chapter should also help to ensure that European multinationals in ACP countries engage in social dialogue with union representatives and use socially and environmentally responsible practices including vis-à-vis their local suppliers and partners," added Monks. "In addition, the EU should finance technical cooperation to help ACP countries with the implementation of ILO labour standards, to increase the focus and impact of development assistance on gender equality as well as to support trade unions' activities and build their capacities."

Finally, as repeatedly argued by trade unions and civil society organisations, EPAs must be made transparent. The EPA negotiations should not be held in secrecy, and the social partners should be genuinely informed and consulted. No less important is the involvement of national parliaments of ACP countries in the negotiation and ratification processes.

The ITUC represents 168 million workers in 155 countries and territories and has 311 national affiliates. Website: <http://www.ituc-csi.org>

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