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ASEM Social partners Meeting with Labour Ministers

Brussels, 13 October 2008 (ITUC OnLine): An international delegation of workers' and employers' organisations is meeting with labour ministers from Europe and Asia on October 13, in Bali. This is the first ever such consultation with the social partners in the context of the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM). The consultation takes place parallel to the biannual ASEM Trade Union Summit, bringing together over 40 trade unionists from around the ASEM region.

ASEM was created 12 years ago as a platform to strengthen dialogue and cooperation between the two continents. After several enlargements on both sides, today ASEM includes the 27 members of the European Union, 16 Asian countries, the European Commission and the ASEAN Secretariat.

Since the beginning of the process, trade unions have been arguing that ASEM should extend its policy dialogue so as to include social and employment issues and that trade unions and civil society organisations should be granted an official consultative status similar to that of the Asia Europe Business Forum (AEBF). Trade unions hope that this first consultation will mark the beginning of a formal recognition of their status within the ASEM structure.

During the consultation, trade unions will insist on the importance of dialogue with workers' organisations at all levels including at the workplace. Collective bargaining cannot be taken for granted anywhere and workers often face serious obstacles when trying to organise. Further, trade unions want to see tangible progress in the implementation of the decent work agenda. Governments from both Asia and Europe have signed up to this agenda, and several Asian governments have committed themselves to a "decent work decade", but implementation still lags behind.

A key point of the discussion is expected to be around the issue of social protection. The need to extend safety nets to all workers including those in the informal economy and to address the social security needs of workers in atypical forms of work such as contract, fixed-term or part time workers will be emphasised by the trade union delegation. Trade unions believe ASEM could make a difference by establishing a cooperation project in the area of social protection.

A part of the discussion will be dedicated to migration and the role trade unions can play in ensuring that migrants' rights are respected. Exploitation of migrant workers is not only an intolerable violation of human rights but also creates serious problems in labour markets. Trade unions reject the "all security" approach in dealing with migration

issues and call for a deeper involvement of the ILO, labour ministries and the social partners.

Trade unions will also call upon ASEM leaders to exert sanctions against Burma so as to force the illegitimate military Junta to respect trade union and other human rights and restore the rule of law.

The consultation with the social partners takes place during the Second ASEM Labour and Employment Ministers Conference. ASEM labour ministers met for the first time two years ago in Potsdam, Germany, where they recognised the need to strengthen the social dimension of globalisation and to promote decent work for all. They further agreed that policies are needed to respect and promote human and social rights, particularly those set out in the ILO Decent Work agenda. This second meeting of the Ministers is expected to build upon the result of their first conference.

To read the trade union statement:

http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/FINAL_statement_Bali_Oct_2008.8_Oct.final.pdf

To read the background document:

http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/ASEM_Background_document_2008.final.pdf

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