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Unions Demand Rights for Migrant Workers at Global Forum

Brussels/Puerto Vallarta, 10 November 2010 (ITUC OnLine): Trade union representatives at a Global Forum on Migration and Development (GMFD) meeting in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, on 8 and 9 November were joined by migrant rights organisations in calling for a rights-based approach to migration, along with more effective action to combat racism and discrimination.

A delegation of 30 trade unionists organised by Global Unions took part in the GMFD “Civil Society Days” in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, preceding the inter-governmental meeting. The union representatives and other civil society participants expressed concern that, while some improvements had been made this year, there are still insufficient possibilities for their voices to be heard in the inter-governmental processes on migration.

Noting the comments of Mexican President Felipe Calderon Hinojosa, which underlined the primacy of human rights laws over migration policies and stressed that the economic strength of the United States would not have been possible without the constant supply of Mexican labour force, several representatives of the Mexican civil society expressed their skepticism about the real commitment of the Mexican government to the human rights of migrants, noting that on many occasions the authorities had simply failed to investigate cases of violations.

In their interventions, Global Unions representatives highlighted that migrant workers are currently feeling the brunt of deteriorating job markets and insisted on the urgent need for a rights-based approach to migration. They call upon governments to adequately protect migrants against racism and xenophobia, which are clearly on the rise in several countries. A side event on the 20th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, co-organised by the ILO and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, was welcomed by the union delegates, who expressed their full support to the Convention, which has yet to be ratified by any of the “migrant destination” countries.

During the discussions, migrants’ rights organisations and Global Unions pointed out to the contradictions of several receiving countries, including the US and the EU, that depend heavily upon cheap migrant labour in order to foster their economic development but fail to protect migrants’ rights. “Migrant workers contribute to the economic and social development; however, they are consistently marginalized, exploited, and abused. It is the fundamental responsibility of all governments to protect the rights of migrant workers,” noted Ambet Yuson, the general secretary of the Building and Wood Workers International.

In their statement the Global Unions warn against the dangers of overestimating the contribution that migration can make to development and the promotion of remittances as a substitute to development strategy. “The recruitment of qualified workers such as nurses and doctors depletes developing countries of human capital. This drain brain is having a devastating impact on the poorest economies especially in Africa,” said Peter Waldorff, the general secretary of PSI, the public service international federation.

In addition, the Global Unions representatives expressed their reservations about the inter-governmental meetings of the GFMD, which are voluntary, non-binding and tend to focus exclusively on temporary migration. The promotion of temporary labour migration programmes as a solution to both labour shortages in destination countries and development deficits in countries of origin needs to be nuanced. “In many cases these simplistic assumptions have proved wrong and the guest workers programmes agreed by sending and receiving countries during GFMDs are increasingly used as a way to circumvent labour laws and standards,” says Sharan Burrow the ITUC general secretary.

With regard to the GFMD review scheduled to take place in 2013 under the UN High Level Dialogue on Migration, Global Unions call for a stronger involvement of the UN and most particularly the ILO. Getting the GFMD process closer to the UN would help ensure that discussions about global migration take place within the normative framework of the UN, something that could help guarantee better protection of migrant workers’ rights. To read the Global Unions’ statement click here: <http://www.ituc-csi.org/global-unions-statement-to-the-4th.html>

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