

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

Trade in Services Agreement risks jeopardising universal access to high quality public services

In the context of a European Commission (EC) consultation, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) submitted a joint statement this week related to the negotiations on a plurilateral Trade in Services Agreement (TISA). For the unions, the direction the TISA negotiations have taken risks jeopardising universal access to high quality public services and must be changed.

Brussels, 9 September 2013 (ITUC OnLine): The Trade in Services Agreement is being negotiated by a group of World Trade Organization (WTO) members that comprises much of the membership of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as well as eight developing countries, self-defined as “Real Good Friends of Services”. The agreement under negotiation aims at substantially liberalising all trade in services including in construction, financial services, public services as well as business and professional services. The agreement is also to impose regulatory disciplines on public and other services and decrease regulation across the board.

The unions are asking the negotiating countries to fully exclude any public services from the scope of the agreement. “The Real Good Friends of Services must ensure that achieving and maintaining universal access to high quality public services is central to the agreement,” Sharan Burrow, ITUC General Secretary, said.

Also, the statement says that a “comprehensive assessment of the agreement’s impact on environment, and on economic and social development, is a prerequisite for informed negotiations”. Moreover, in order to guarantee a democratic and inclusive agreement, the negotiations need to be transparent and accessible to the public.

Another concern raised is the intended inclusion of an investor-to-state dispute resolution that could prove to be catastrophic for policy space. The ITUC and ETUC stress that if the agreement is to include investors’ guarantees, an intergovernmental dispute settlement would be more appropriate than the investor-to-state procedure.

Further to this, “investors have responsibilities, and they need to be spelled out and enforced,” Bernadette Segol, ETUC General Secretary, added. Indeed, the trade union movement’s submission to the EC calls for enforceable labour standards so as to guarantee a minimum level of convergence, and an established and resourceful capacity building mechanism that would facilitate gradual convergence.

The ITUC and the ETUC will continue engaging with the parties with a view to informing the negotiations about these stated goals and principles.

The ITUC represents 175 million workers in 156 countries and territories and has 315 national affiliates.

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