

Environment Ministers & Civil Society attentive to union messages

Unions At UNEP Global Environment Meeting Focus on Green Jobs

9 February, 2007: A message delivered by Guy Ryder, General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) drew support from many world environmental leaders attending a high-level meeting of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) in Nairobi Kenya this week.

Government Environment Ministers and Civil Society representatives from around the world heard Ryder accentuate a number of the key trade union messages about the promotion of 'green jobs' that were being delivered throughout the week at the UNEP event by a ITUC/TUAC delegation of trade union and Sustainlabour representatives from Kenya, Morocco, France, Spain, U.K. and the African Region.

In his speech, Ryder warned governments against a loss of momentum in their efforts to integrate the social dimension of sustainable development into strategies for environmental protection, climate change and other issues. Governments around the world, he suggested, are facing the most dramatic market failures in history, with the need for active intervention in the market becoming more apparent than ever, especially at the national level.

It is therefore up to national governments to take leadership, to become actively engaged in addressing the constraints of an international system that has been performing badly, and UNEP should be in charge of designing a script that addresses the outstanding challenges governments face, Ryder said. New processes are needed to fashion a green economy, in which 'just transition' measures and 'decent work' serve as the key features of national programmes to address any loss of jobs or livelihoods that may result.

In all this, Ryder maintained, there is a need to promote interaction between business and trade unions, to take advantage of the wealth of experience these parties have in negotiating restructuring of enterprises and sectors, whilst preserving jobs and the environment.

Under Ryder's leadership, trade unions remain firmly committed to the promotion of sustainable development, and will work with UNEP in the difficult and historical transformations needed to help shape public opinion and build support for the costs of change. Guy Ryder's speech is available: http://www.global-unions.org/pdf/ohsewpC_6g.EN.pdf

Global Civil Society Forum embraces trade union issues

Civil society representatives from business, indigenous peoples, local authorities, NGO's, scientists, workers & trade unions, women and youth assembled prior to the formal meeting of government ministries to discuss collaborative strategies for input to UNEP. As well, they discussed frameworks for future involvement in the UN organization, through its annual and regional meetings and within its structures, offices and programmes.

The focus at this year's Global Civil Society Forum was on ways to strengthen partnerships between Major Groups, and to increase their involvement in the work of UNEP. Towards this end, a trade union representative from ITUC/TUAC spoke at the forum about the potential watchdog role on the environment and the workplace that the trade union movement sees for itself. He identified challenges facing worker training and education and discussed the resistance of employers toward worker

participation and the reluctance of governments to identify the workplace as a field of environmental action. The Forum heard the commitments by trade unions to engage in the long term with Civil Society in its relations with UNEP.

Trade union rights, ‘asbestos ban’ & HIV/AIDS brought into scope

At the Civil Society Forum trade unions raised key messages which were introduced into the Civil Society statement on globalization. It called on the UNEP Governing Council to ensure “[...] respect for basic human and labour rights and introduce policies for just employment transition as a central feature of environment protection and to ensure that workers negatively affected by changes are provided with safe and decent employment alternatives”.

On chemical issues, unions obtained Civil Society Forum support for “a global asbestos ban for use and commercialization”. The statement said, in part, that, “.... UNEP should promote better understanding of global and regional impact of all forms of asbestos, on the environment and public health and provide guidelines for a programme towards the elimination of asbestos use. We call on those countries, which have already banned use and production of asbestos in their own countries to stop trade in asbestos and set up policies for safe clean up and disposal for asbestos use”.

Other activities of the trade union caucus included delivery of a letter to each government delegation requesting its support in efforts to convince G8 Environment Ministers to call on their Heads of State to create a high level working group on HIV/AIDS at the next G8 Summit in June. This letter contained information needed by Ministers to understand the environmental linkages that justify more concerted action on HIV/AIDS by them.

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- For information on the Global Civil Society Forum see http://www.unep.org/civil_society/
- For summaries of the Eighth Global Civil Society Forum (by IISD) see <http://www.iisd.ca/ymb/csf/>
- For UNEP’s website about the 24th Governing Council and Global Ministerial Meetings: <http://www.unep.org/gc/gc24/>