

Opinion Letter

**International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU)
Education International (EI)
Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC)**

HISTORIC SUMMIT ON POVERTY THREATENED BY WRANGLING

When 170 leaders of nations meet at the UN in New York next week, they must act on poverty in the world. Never before has the world seen so many people mobilized with one message: *we must act on poverty and we must do it now!*

155 million people are united in the Global Campaign against Poverty, joined by million more around the globe. Great concerts have brought young and old together, with enormous media attention. Major figures from sport, entertainment and business have joined the cause.

And yet, after all this, never before has the scene been set for such a dramatic let-down. As leaders prepare to leave for New York, negotiators are working around the clock, all this because of last minute moves by the US administration to gut the planned global blueprint for tackling poverty of its meaning.

So many hopes were invested in this summit, so much work had gone into persuading governments that this is the time to achieve key development goals – the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Now, in one final swoop, all that is under threat. The new Ambassador appointed by US President George W. Bush claims the US never committed to specific development targets.

The working people of this world are no stranger to poverty. In this day and age, a job does not mean that you can feed your family, afford to send your kids to school or even get clean water. And this is not only the situation in impoverished countries, it is the reality in many industrialized ones as well. The working poor have become entrenched in most societies. More and more, jobs are precarious and conditions are often dangerous. When the global trade union movement calls for decent work, we mean a job that is free from harassment and discrimination, a job that provides enough to live and a job that does not endanger health or life. These things may seem basic, but the reality of today's global economy is that the majority of working people don't have these basic rights. This is why the global trade union movement is a part of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty. It affects us all!

At the heart of the battle of words going on before the Summit in New York is a profound difference of views about how to tackle poverty in the world. From the time world leaders met at the UN 5 years ago – in the year 2000 – a great consensus has emerged, bringing together governments, the international community, leading economists and thinkers and civil society, including the trade unions, business, development organizations, and well-known personalities. That consensus calls for

increasing aid resources, forgiving or restructuring debt and agreeing to fair trade. The focus for this consensus has been the vision contained in 8 clearly stated Millennium Development Goals.

But there is another view, that compassionate rhetoric and calls to voluntary effort can be combined with privatization, replacement of government responsibility by the free market, and trade liberalization. The US Administration has chosen in these last days to reject the worldwide consensus of the last 5 years, rejecting a vision of clear goals and measurable indicators of progress. Instead, the new Ambassador to the UN appointed recently by President Bush has told the representatives of 190 other countries to set aside their work, and focus instead on US demands for UN reform.

The trade union movement also wants a more effective UN. The trade union movement wants a better response to violation of human rights, and in particular the rights of exploited men and women. The trade union movement wants more effective action on terror and security – for ordinary working people are most often the victims.

But throwing out the MDGs will achieve none of these things. For the worldwide consensus has mobilized people around the planet precisely because it presents a vision able to tackle all these pressing issues together, and to do it realistically and with widespread public support. Our members have demonstrated their capacity to mobilize in great coalitions against poverty – within the US, and in every country of the world. Leaders must know that if they show political will and resolve in New York, they will get the support of the people, and that our organizations will play their part in mobilizing that support.

Guy Ryder (ICFTU) Fred van Leeuwen (EI) John Evans (TUAC)

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World leaders will meet at the opening of the United Nations General Assembly in New York 14-16 September

Guy Ryder is General Secretary of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) with 145 million members in 154 countries. Guy Ryder has been invited to address leaders at the Summit 14-16 September.

Fred van Leeuwen is General Secretary of Education International (EI) representing over 29 million teachers in 166 countries. Fred van Leeuwen currently chairs the Conference of Global Unions Federation.

John Evans is General Secretary of the Trade Union Advisory Committee (TUAC) at the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). TUAC's affiliates consist of 56 national trade union centres in the 30 OECD countries; together they represent some 66 million workers.