

TRADE UNIONS DERIVE SOME ENCOURAGEMENT FROM OECD ENVIRONMENT MINISTERS' MEETING

Trade union participants reported some encouragement derived from discussions in a three-day OECD Environment Ministers meeting in Paris which ended Wednesday (21 April). Trade unionists took part in stakeholder consultations with Ministers at which they detailed measures that OECD Governments should take in designing sustainable development plans. These included employment transition measures, combined with workplace assessment processes that engage workers and employers in common action for change.

The OECD Ministerial meeting was held April 19 to 21 to evaluate progress on the Environmental Strategy that the Ministers adopted three years ago, and on the outcomes of the WSSD process of implementation.

A delegation of trade unionists from France, Denmark, Italy and Norway with the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC) took part in special consultations with Environment Ministers from the most industrialised countries in the world. They contributed to the focused discussions on climate change, trade and environment, decoupling of growth from natural resource uses, as well as technology and innovation issues. The implementation and assessment of sustainable development has become a priority for the OECD, particularly in the wake of the WSSD.

"We want the OECD to help foster cooperation between workers and employers to engage in common workplace assessments and reporting processes," said Bjorn Erikson of LO-Norway and Chair of the GLocal Unions Working Party on Occupational health, safety and Environment (OHSE). At the meeting, the delegation emphasised the importance of addressing occupational health and safety issues as a cornerstone for promoting technology and innovation for sustainable development. However, Erikson stated clearly, "Government and business implementation plans will continue to be limited without more dedicated commitment to understand and to address the employment implications for change."

He added: "Establishing just transition and employment measures is the only sure way of providing the socio-economic security that will foster engagement and motivate workers to become involved at the workplace level and to consider how to change their personal consumption habits at home and as members of the community."

During the conference, TUAC General Secretary John Evans stressed that Governments could expect more of business than just what is included in legal requirements, but "corporate social responsibility is not an alternative to good government regulations." He drew attention to the fact that there is a strong demand for the TUAC user guide to the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises which is now available in 18 languages. He urged that the OECD work together with the ILO and WTO on the interface between Ministerial Environmental Agreements (MEAs) and trade.

In a closing session, Ministers concluded that OECD countries would fail to meet previously agreed targets for 2010 unless they introduce more ambitious policies supported by stronger political will. Taking stock of progress towards implementing OECD environment policy targets adopted three years ago, Ministers said urgent action was needed:

- to reduce greenhouse gases

- to address climate change
- to limit biodiversity loss, and
- to allow economic growth without seriously damaging the environment.

Ministers and stakeholders agreed on the need for stable, long-term environmental targets to provide a predictable framework for national and international action. Looking ahead, Ministers asked OECD to quantify the costs of not meeting environmental challenges, and called on the Paris-based organisation to produce a new Environmental Outlook. The next OECD Ministerial session on the environment was set for 2008.

The TUAC input at the Ministerial follows several months of trade union and stakeholder contributions to OECD work in preparing the meeting.