Commentary on the 2006 International Forum on Economic Globalization and Trade Unions

Friday, December 8, 2006

This week China is hosting the 2006 International Forum on Economic Globalization and Trade Unions. This forum, attended by 40 foreign trade union leaders, includes representatives from the World Federation of Trade Unions, the Organization of African Trade Union Unity and the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions. Its aim is to find ways to promote the international trade union movement and protect workers rights in an increasingly globalized world. This is the second of these forums to be hosted by China in the last two years.

It is clear that China seeks to increase cooperation with international labor unions and the larger union movement as a whole. In the opening ceremony, Wang Zhaoguo, president of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), said that all trade unions, big or small, should promote justice and fairness on the basis of independence, mutual respect, equality and democratic consultations. Topics discussed at the forum included: migrant worker rights, the coordination of labor relations, and the international trade union movement.

While the economy of China has flourished, workers in the coastal areas have not reaped a fair share for the fruits of their labor. There is an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor. Most workers are overworked, underpaid and do not enjoy social security benefits or health insurance. In time, if these issues are not addressed and continue to worsen, they will endanger China's economic growth.

With increasing globalization and its effects, the Chinese government has realized it must play a greater role if it wants to preserve stability and prevent the formation of independent labor unions. Having independent labor unions would greatly affect the Communist Party's ability to govern. In order to prevent independent labor unions from forming, the government seeks to create a harmonious relationship between enterprises and the workers. In its efforts to promote social stability, the ACFTU is seeking to gain more influence over multinationals operating within China.

China Labor Watch welcomes ACFTU's increased willingness to shine a spotlight on critical labor issues and take an increased role in the international labor movement. While rich countries gain from this competition, ultimately it is the workers in the developing countries that pay the price.

We certainly look forward to the day that the ACFTU is able to represent workers and advocate for their needs in a democratic manner. However, until that is the case, there is a great need for the involvement of labor NGOs and independent labor unions, which are currently forbidden, that will voice the growing needs and aspirations of workers.