

The road to China via Hong Kong

TRADE

Global mass organising around the World Trade Organisation (WTO) ministerial meeting to be held in Hong Kong in December is hotting up. **Hassen Lorgat** outlines an initiative where unions and NGOs are beginning to work closer together in order to deal with the challenges of global trade.



SANGOCO and Cosatu recently held a workshop to obtain a better understanding of the issues to be dealt with during the next WTO ministerial. One of the critical issues up for discussion is non-agricultural market access (NAMA), which forms part of the WTO's latest attempt at further and extensive tariff liberalisation.

All speakers agreed with Cosatu's deputy president Violet Seboni, when she called on all present to organise against job losses, by 'taking action and drawing a line to say that unemployment and poverty are too high. We must draw a line now and say that job loss as a result of trade liberalisation must stop, and must stop now. The NAMA proposals at the WTO will only exacerbate trade liberalisation and job loss. They will also prevent us from developing our economies as the developed countries did. This can only be disastrous for us'. She added: 'Any trade union worthy of being called a trade union must defend members' jobs. All progressive organisations must defend the working class in the workplace and the communities, and stop multinational and corporate interests pushing for trade liberalisations through undemocratic processes in the WTO - because these will only open the door to job losses and increased poverty.'

Delegates at the workshop, including

those from the SA Council of Churches, agreed that South Africa's trade negotiators must do an audit of the negotiations 'past and present' to determine the winners and losers. 'In all cases - the workers and the poor were the losers', the workshop concluded. Participants from different sectors organised by Cosatu testified to the negative impact of trade liberalisation.

WHY THE CHANGE?

The workshop forms part of a growing trend for unions, NGOs and community-based organisations to work together on global issues. Why is this happening? It may be because we are 'pressured to unite' by the impact of capitalist greed in workplaces and communities, and the political realisation that working together is better than non-cooperation. This trend may also mark the growing 'maturation' and realisation on the part of all, particularly NGOs, that the involvement of unions as the key constituency of working class power is indispensable. Unions however are realising that size does not count in some instances, and that NGOs despite being smaller have access to resources and skills that can enhance the struggle for socio-economic justice. The political maturity may be summarised as - march separately but strike together.

WAY TO HONG KONG

The workshop emerged with the following views:

- Unions and NGOs agree that the current round of negotiations will be bad for the developing world.
- The WTO is an anti-trade justice forum and that it serves the interests of the powerful transnational multinationals based in the G8 countries. It must be radically and fundamentally reformed or replaced by a pro poor, pro justice and pro human rights multilateral trade and development institution.
- The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have destroyed African economies by opening them up to the so-called market, through privatisation and currency devaluations etc, leading to severe cuts in social spending and destruction of public services.
- The so-called third world debt has been paid over and over again. For every \$1 borrowed, African countries have paid back \$2.5 to the multilateral financial institutions. Thus debt was used as a political tool to further open up African markets and those from the south.

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