



# Labour fights AIDS

**Report on the Labour Forum organised on 11-13 August 2006 by the Canadian Labour Congress in co-operation with the ICFTU, Global Unions and the ILO on the occasion of the International Conference on HIV/AIDS in Toronto**

The Labour Forum hosted by the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) brought together some hundred trade union activists from around the world on the eve of the International Conference on AIDS held in Toronto and provided an opportunity to discuss the effectiveness of the trade union contribution to the fight against the pandemic, exchange views and experiences and develop workplace strategies to deal with the consequences of HIV/AIDS.

### **Introduction**

The Forum was preceded by an international reception in Hart House, University of Toronto, hosted by Hassan Yussuff, Secretary-Treasurer of the CLC. Jean Pierre Blackburn, Labour Minister of Canada and Minister of the Economic Development Agency for the Regions of Quebec, addressed the reception and acknowledged that the workplace could play a vital role in dealing with the challenge, in educating the workforce on it and in finding ways of prevention. He said that the Government of Canada took a collaborative approach in the fight against HIV/AIDS – working in partnership with all levels of government, non-governmental organisations and community groups. He also emphasised that the objective of his Government at international level was to promote good governance, the rule of law and the respect for labour rights.

The Labour Forum opened on Saturday 12 August 2006 with a welcome address by Hassan Yussuff, Secretary-Treasurer, CLC, who pointed out that the number of people infected with HIV throughout the world – approximately 40m – was more than the population of Canada, that 95% of all infections occurred in the developing world and that women bore the brunt of the burden of the pandemic. He also stressed the enormous potential of the workplace as a point of entry in the battle against the disease and the need for trade unions to play a leading role in influencing government policy and in fighting for access to affordable treatment for the most vulnerable in society.

### **Policy and advocacy**

Fred Hahn from the Canadian Union of Public Employees and advocate of LGBT workers' rights was the Moderator of a Panel on Policy and Advocacy, consisting of Alan Leather, Chair, Global Unions HIV/AIDS Committee and Representative of the Public Services International (PSI); Gemma Adaba, Representative to the UN, ICFTU; LeRoy Trotman, Secretary-General, Barbados Workers' Union (BWU) and Chair, ILO Workers' Group; and Theo Steele, Campaign Co-ordinator, Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Alan Leather outlined the work carried out by Global Unions, pointed to the importance of proper co-ordination of the trade union response and stressed that trade unions should get involved in national strategies and persuade governments to implement agreed policies. Gemma Adaba said that HIV/AIDS was the cause and consequence of poverty and inequity, referred to the weakening of social infrastructures by the prescriptions of international financial institutions and underscored the importance of anti-poverty strategies in the context of achieving Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and of the decent work agenda in combating the disease. LeRoy Trotman drew particular attention to the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the

Caribbean and its relationship with migration and tourism and said that the problems were exacerbated by natural disasters like hurricanes in the region. Theo Steele told the participants that COSATU and its affiliates played a pioneering role in developing workplace policies on HIV/AIDS in South Africa, that education and training was the key to a successful strategy and that international solidarity strengthened by tactical alliances with interested parties could be a vital factor in dealing with the consequences of the pandemic. There were a number of interventions from the floor which emphasised the role of trade unions in fighting stigma, discrimination and marginalization at workplace and in lobbying governments and institutions on better protection and support for affected workers.

### **Workers' rights**

The afternoon session started with the Panel on Workers' Rights with Darla Leard, Representative of the CLC and advocate of Aboriginal Workers' Rights as Moderator. The Panellists were Dr Sophia Kisting, Director, ILO Programme on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work; Elena Reynaga, General Secretary, Sex Industry Workers' Union, Argentina; and Hamida Kathun, Representative of the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS). Darla Leard, in her opening remarks, pointed out that the infection rate among aboriginals was high and on the increase. Sophia Kisting, in her presentation, stressed that trade unionists and their structures and institutions could play a vital role in the fight against the disease, that stigma and discrimination remained a serious problem and that the work on HIV/AIDS should be fully integrated into health and safety at workplace. She added that, in her view, the potential of the workplace in the fight against the pandemic had yet to be realised, that the voice of workers had not yet been heard loud enough and that more training and education opportunities were needed for trade unionists if they were to play a critical role. Elena Reynaga told the Forum that people too often put the blame on sex workers for the spread of the disease, that hypocrisy on sexual matters was a serious barrier in understanding the problem and in finding solutions to it and that members of her profession needed to be empowered and included in education and training programmes on HIV/AIDS. Hamida Kathun said that, although the incidence of the disease was low in her country, there was a serious risk of it spreading fast due to a number of factors including extreme poverty, and that her organisation had worked very closely in collaboration with non-governmental organisations in the dissemination of information on the disease and that the international trade union movement should continue their support for their efforts in this regard.

### **International solidarity**

Marie-Clarke Walker, Vice President of the CLC, was the Moderator of the Panel on International Solidarity on Sunday 13 August 2006. Angela Lamosi, AFRO HIV/AIDS Programme Co-ordinator; Wouter Van Der Schaaf, EFAIDS Programme Co-ordinator, Education International; Regina Fernando, Gender and AIDS Project Co-ordinator, OTM-CS, Mozambique; and Nick Sigler, Head of International Relations, UNISON, UK, were the panellists. Angela Lamosi gave a brief account of the work carried out by AFRO under their HIV/AIDS Programme

and expressed gratitude to the LO-Norway and the TUC for their continued support while Regina Fernando informed the participants of education and training activities organised by OTM in the campaign on HIV/AIDS in her country and spoke of sexual harassment and the vulnerability of women to the disease. Wouter Van Der Shaaf from Education International underscored the role of teachers in the dissemination of information and the need for collaborative approach in tackling the pandemic. Nick Sigler described the background to UNISON's involvement in international work, mentioned some projects supported by the UNISON International Development Fund and informed the Forum that eight out of the thirty projects were concerned with HIV/AIDS, adding that they had also submitted a project proposal on HIV/AIDS to the Department for International Development for its consideration for funding.

Bandula Kothalawala from the TUC (UK), in his intervention from the floor, detailed some of the work carried out by the TUC and its affiliates, including the financial assistance provided for the AFRO HIV/AIDS Programme for a number of years and outlined the activities undertaken by the TUC and affiliates in collaboration with interested NGOs to lobby the British Government for more resources for the Global Fund. He also referred to the TUC submissions to the UK Government Strategy on HIV/AIDS published in 2004 and to the recent White Paper on International Development, pointed to the UK Government's pledge to work in co-operation with trade unionists on development issues and invited colleagues from developing countries to approach the DFID offices in their countries and regions and explore avenues of collaboration with them on HIV/AIDS, gender and equality, and good governance.

A number of interventions from the floor underlined the importance of international solidarity in the fight against the pandemic and the need for proper co-ordination and for avoiding wasteful duplication of efforts by trade unions.

### **Conclusions**

Hassan Yussuff in his concluding remarks brought to the attention of participants the grave threat hanging over the poor and the vulnerable in developing countries as well as in developed countries, made a special plea for more resources and greater collaboration and co-ordination in the trade union response to the challenge and expressed the hope that international solidarity would make a difference to those in need of social protection, treatment, care and understanding.