

No to an EU-ASEAN FTA!

Forge International Solidarity against FTA's!

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The Partido ng Manggagawa as the political party of the working class in the Philippines rejects the proposed EU-ASEAN FTA for being a clear and present danger to the workers and the people of our country. An EU-ASEAN FTA will be more of the same "free trade" agreements whose purported aims is trade liberalization but whose real agenda is the pillage and exploitation of ASEAN nations by EU transnational companies. With the recent conclusion of the controversial JPEPA, the bilateral FTA with Japan, the Filipino people can unfortunately declare that "we have been there and done that."

For the working class, the fact that a final text of the agreement has not been made public cannot be an excuse not to oppose it immediately. On the contrary, it all the more emphasizes the lack of transparency and corporate secrecy that free trade agreements in general have been transacted and negotiated. The EU-ASEAN FTA is no different. It is being crafted behind the backs of the workers and the people in order to blindside them with another "free trade" agreement that will be contrary to their interests.

The insertion of a labor or social clause in the text will not sweeten the bitter, or rather poisonous, nature of the FTA. A provision paying lip service to respect for labor rights is merely a carrot meant to make the pain of the stick somehow bearable for the workers. While an agreement with a token labor or social clause is better than one without, it does not make the FTA any more acceptable. The workers reject not the labor clause but the "free trade" agreement itself.

We have no illusions that an EU-ASEAN FTA will benefit the workers or the people. The EU has made it as clear as day in its vision of a "Global Europe" that "free trade" is a mechanism to pry open the market of other countries for its TNC's. It is the corporate interests of the imperialist countries at the core of the EU that will be served by a FTA with the ASEAN. The very fact that the EU funded the preparatory work of the "ASEAN-EU Visions Group" speaks volumes about who stands to profit from such an investment.

The creation of bilateral or multilateral agreements became a flanking maneuver by the imperialist countries after the collapse of the Doha Round of the WTO negotiations, first at Cancun in 2003, followed by Geneva in 2006, and then at last month's meeting at Geneva again. Stymied by the stalemate at the Doha Round, the imperialist countries have shifted to concluding agreements outside of the WTO to push for the TNC's agenda of further liberalization in manufacturing and agriculture, and opening up new sectors like services and government procurement.

The welfare of the workers and the people will not be served by such agreements meant to advance the agenda of TNC's. The implementation of liberalization, deregulation and privatization has ruined domestic industry and agriculture with poverty, unemployment and inequality intensifying in its wake. The workers have suffered in direct proportion from the policies of cheap wages, labor flexibilization and union busting that are hallmarks of capitalist competition in the age of globalization.

The rules of the WTO and the provisions of FTA's work in favor of the TNC's of the North rather than

the people of the South. Labor in particular is a sacrificial lamb for the TNC's in their quest for greater productivity and flexibility from the cheap labor of Asia to gain comparative advantage in global competition.

Two decades of neoliberal globalization is enough proof and the experience of the EU's FTA's with countries like Mexico and Chile bore this out. In the Philippines, the accelerated implementation of liberalization, deregulation and privatization have already allowed the entry of TNC's like Union Fenosa of Spain, United Utilities Pacific Holdings of UK, and Suez Lyonnais of France in the water and power sectors. Privatization of the formerly state-owned water and power industries have been disastrous to the consumers with the workers and the people reeling from poor service and escalating costs.

As genuine internationalists, the workers know the benefits of trade based upon the cooperation of independent nations. It is the ruthless competition among TNC's on the basis of a merciless race to the bottom of wages, labor standards and working conditions that we resist.

There can be no "free trade" under globalization where monopolies, in the form of TNC's, dominate the world economy. "Free trade" is a myth when the bulk of global trade is in fact internal transactions between TNC's and their affiliates and subcontractors. In fact "free trade" agreements are not really about trade as they are about freedom for TNC's to operate, which boils down to their opportunity to plunder the economies of other countries. FTA's are not so much about breaking down trade barriers among countries as they are about the TNC's breaking free from labor, environmental, social and state regulations that have been previously established to protect workers, peoples and nations against corporate abuse and excess.

An EU-ASEAN FTA will merely pave the way for the recolonization by the imperialist countries of Europe of its former colonies in South East Asia. The only difference is that this new form of colonization will use commodities and capital as its armaments instead of guns and cannons. The old colonial powers have not even repaid their debts to its erstwhile colonies and now the new imperialist countries are poised to re-conquer the ASEAN market of 530 million people that ranks 6th in EU's total trade.

The workers and the peoples of the ASEAN countries must now stand in opposition to the proposed EU-ASEAN FTA and in defense of their sovereignty and independence. The workers movement of the ASEAN nations must call upon the labor movement of Europe to link up in solidarity to protect the interests of the working class against the corporate agenda of the TNC's. It is not an illusory social clause that will safeguard labor rights worldwide but the solidarity of workers struggles and resistance across the countries.