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Proposed Pacific trade agreement must deliver for workers, jobs and the environment, say unions

A proposed trans-Pacific trade agreement must create good jobs and protect the rights and interests of working people, say unions.

Negotiations for the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership Trade Agreement must also lead to long-term and balanced economic development, and promote a healthy and sustainable environment, said the ACTU.

Negotiations for the proposed agreement between Australia, the United States, New Zealand, Chile, Peru, Singapore, Vietnam and Brunei Darussalam will begin today. The peak union bodies from Australia, the US, New Zealand and Singapore today released an historic joint declaration on an agreed set of principles under which they believe the negotiations should proceed.

ACTU President Sharan Burrow said the proposed agreement must deliver more for working people in all the nations than previous free trade agreements have done.

“We cannot afford another trade agreement that opens the doors for investment and profits by big multinational corporations but fails to create good jobs for workers,” Ms Burrow said.

“Throughout the negotiations, the participating governments must adopt a job lens through which all decisions must contribute to the promotion of high-quality jobs and sustainable economic development among the member nations. For Australia, this concern extends to Pacific Island countries who, although not party to the agreement, may be collaterally affected. In this situation, we would oppose any trade agreements where the Pacific Island economies were not clear beneficiaries.

“Unions understand that fair international trade is a major driver of economic growth and prosperity in both developed and developing nations. Trade can also be a catalyst for better human rights and environmental standards in developing countries. But it must be fair and if it is to have our support, the Pacific trade agreement must be well balanced, create good jobs, protect labour rights, and lead to both sustainable economic development and a healthy environment.”

Ms Burrow said there must be consultation with community representatives, including unions, who should not be shut out of negotiations.

“Labour rights are an essential component of trade, and we want to ensure that any benefits flow through to workers and not just the profits of big corporations,” Ms Burrow said.

“Any agreement must adopt and maintain core internationally-recognised labour rights, including collective bargaining. Protection of the environment is also a critical trade policy objective.”

Ms Burrow said other core principles outlined in the joint unions’ statement included protecting essential public services, including education, health, post, social services, transport and utilities.

The proposed agreement cannot over-ride domestic government procurement policies to promote local economic development, job creation and environmental and social goals.

And while there may be legitimate reasons for some measures to protect health, public safety and the environment, it must lead to equal and balanced market access to the member countries.

Media contact:

Mark Phillips ph (03) 8676 7266 or 0422 009 011 mphillips@actu.org.au