

Text of letter sent to companies in December 2001

Dear Sir,

In November 2000, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the specialised agency of the United Nations for social matters, determined that no progress had been made in the process of ending the widespread use of forced labour in Burma (the country renamed Myanmar by its military junta). This conclusion led to the decision by the ILO Governing Body to fully implement the ILO resolution on Burma adopted at the International Labour Conference in June 2000.

The resolution, which had the overwhelming support of governments, employers and workers' organisations, and which aimed at ending forced labour in Burma as soon as possible, "recommends to the Organisation's constituents as a whole - governments, employers and workers - that they: (I) review, in the light of the conclusions of the Commission of Inquiry, the relations that they may have with [Burma] and take appropriate measures to ensure that [Burma] cannot take advantage of such relations to perpetuate or extend the system of forced or compulsory labour (...) and to contribute as far as possible to the implementation of its recommendations; and (ii) report back in due course and at appropriate intervals to the Governing Body".

The Global Unions group, including the ICFTU, the International Trade Secretariats (ITS) and the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC), has been campaigning for several years for the full respect of human and workers' rights in Burma. Full details of these organisations are attached. The information which we provided was instrumental in leading to the ILO decision. We have also provided the ILO with new evidence on forced labour throughout 2001. This clearly indicates that forced labour persists on a large scale and that the authorities in Burma are still not genuinely committed to end the violation of the most fundamental rights of their citizens. This has largely been confirmed by the findings of the ILO High-Level Team that was sent to Burma in September of this year.

Based on the evidence available, the international trade union movement firmly believes that it is impossible to conduct any trade or other economic activity with Burma without providing direct support, mostly financial, to the military junta. The top military hierarchy is directly responsible for the massive use of forced labour. This has also been clearly established by the ILO Commission of Inquiry. Any commercial or economic links with Burma therefore help the junta "to perpetuate or extend the system of forced or compulsory labour".

We held a meeting in Tokyo to develop a strategy for further trade union action on Burma. That meeting adopted a statement that, among other things, stated that "national and multinational companies trading with and/or investing in Burma should withdraw as a matter of urgency and bans on imports from and exports to Burma should be introduced immediately. The union movement at every level must initiate early discussion with such companies. Failure of companies to comply will mean public exposure by the international trade union movement and the promotion of other action, as appropriate, including consumer pressure and boycotts."

We have found reliable information that your company either operates in Burma, has business relations with the country, has been in direct contact with the officials of the regime, or promotes or advertises tourism in that country. If this information is inaccurate, or if you have already decided to break those links, it would be helpful if you would let us know as soon as possible. We are currently holding a list of over 250 companies that have this status. This list can be found on our web-site: <http://www.global-unions.org/burma/>.

However, prior to adding your company to the list, we wanted to have the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with your company and others known to be involved in Burma. We would appreciate a response to this communication as soon as possible, in particular as relates to the nature and scope of your company's present or planned activities in or in connection with Burma, including any trade, export, import or investment links which your company may be engaged in or planning to have with private or public Burmese companies, enterprises, organisations or institutions.

We are, of course, in touch over these issues with our national affiliated organisations on Burma, many of which may have direct relations with your company at national level, and intend to make sure that they are fully informed of our communications with companies on this issue. We would very much appreciate it if you could respond to this communication by 20 January 2002.

Thank you for your consideration.

Bill Jordan, ICFTU General Secretary
David Cockroft, ITF General Secretary & Chair of the ITS General Conference
John Evans, General Secretary, TUAC